















THE CALIFORNIA RANCH HOUSE

Cliff May

Interviewed by Marlene L. Laskey

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
Oral History Program  
University of California  
Los Angeles

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## CONTENTS

Introduction. . . . .	vii
Interview History. . . . .	.xii
TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (April 14, 1982) . . . . .	.1
Genealogy of May's maternal ancestors, the Estudillo family--The Estudillo house and the functional quality of early California adobe ranch architecture--Memories of his aunt Jane Magee and Las Flores Ranch--The process of proving land ownership after California's annexation--May's extended family in California--Las Flores Ranch--Functional quality of ranch and barn architecture--Ramona's marriage place.	
TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (May 12, 1982) . . . . .	36
May's paternal grandfather, Charles E. May--May's father, John Clifford May--May's boyhood neighborhood in San Diego--Irving Gill houses in San Diego--Basement and layout of May's childhood home--Never being able to please his father--His brother, Henry C. May, wants to make money--Prominent citizens of San Diego--May's musical interests as a youth.	
TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (May 12, 1982) . . . . .	.73
Learns to play the piano--Enters college--The stock market crash of 1929--Begins designing and building furniture--Designs and builds his first house.	
[Second Part] (June 9, 1982) . . . . . .86	
The modern California ranch house--Importance of a designer to an architect--Few regulations and low costs when May first started building--Building styles which May considers poor architecture--His low opinion of Le Corbusier and the International style--May's first use of the pullman lavatory--His use of cement floors.	





TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (June 9, 1982) . . . . . 115

Importance of rock cushion in cement floors--  
The problem of working with clients who do not  
want to take the designer's advice--Builds a  
house for John A. Smith and Smith offers to put  
up money for May to build houses in Los Angeles--  
May builds a house for his own family--Various  
houses May built in San Diego--His association  
with John A. Smith--Difficulties with the Board  
of Architectural Examiners--Feuds between  
architects and builders--Riviera Ranch  
development--Decision to build good houses  
rather than cheap houses.

TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (June 9, 1982) . . . . . 154

Becomes acquainted with Paul Frankl's  
furniture--Building houses for Frederic M.  
Blow--Building for John Galvin.

[Second Part] (July 21, 1982) . . . . . 163

Early California ranch architecture--The  
Monterey box-style house--Maximizing space on  
building lots by building up to the property  
line--Different ways of disposing of garbage--  
Need to adapt each house to the client--Need  
for architect to examine the site before  
building--The designing of Balboa Park by the  
Olmstead brothers and Bertram Goodhue--Other  
builders of ranch houses.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (September 15, 1982) . . . . 190

The spreading of the ranch house idea--  
Innovations in May's houses--Costs of ranch  
house construction--Puts out the book Western  
Ranch Houses with Sunset magazine--May's  
"Pacesetter House" featured in House Beautiful--  
Other architects begin copying May's houses--  
The need for larger living rooms--Mandalay (CM  
No. 5) originally seemed too big, now does not  
seem big enough--House and Garden features  
Mandalay--May's development of one-room houses  
with movable partitions.



TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (September 15, 1982) . . . . 230

Advantages of the open plan which is not divided up into a number of rooms--The Skylight House--May's designs plagiarized--Building prefabricated houses in the fifties.

[Second Part] (September 30, 1982) . . . . 240

Copyright laws and architecture--Development of the nail-on sash--Lawsuits May has initiated against builders who copied his plans--Lawsuit against Fletcher Jones.

TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (September 30, 1982) . . . . .269

May's assistance for architects with legal problems--General Motors' and DeVilbliss's unauthorized use of May houses in advertisements.

[Second Part] (January 13, 1983) . . . . . 278

May's opinion that famous people make good clients--Designing an apartment building for Shirley MacLaine and her husband--May's involvement with low-cost housing across the country--Low-cost housing and the problems with building regulations--After designing low-cost housing, May returns to designing more expensive single-family homes--Designs the Mondavi Winery--Mandalay.

TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (January 13, 1983) . . . . . .308

Houses with movable partitions--Problems in making skylights too big--Need for space in houses--Need to observe a few basic design rules--Walk-in refrigerators--Indoor swimming pools--Means of heating homes--May's music room--May's book collecting--Antique furniture--Flying--Tendency for artists' work to improve as artists get older--The house for Joe W. Brown that was never built.

Index . . . . . 352



## INTRODUCTION

"I just built one kind of house . . . I just had one style," says Cliff May, the foremost exponent of the California ranch house style. In terms of sheer numbers of buildings credited to him alone, he ranks as one of the most prolific figures in architecture to have emerged in California in the twentieth century. He has personally designed and/or built over 1,000 homes and commercial properties. His work can be found all over the United States, in Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, Australia, and in the Philippines. Beyond that his designs for low-cost ranch homes were used in the construction of at least 18,000 houses built by licensed contractors after the end of World War II. May's work is noted for its high artistic quality and individuality. He is generally considered to be the "author" of the California ranch house style, the designer who first enunciated its basic principles and then developed the ideas over the years. The popularity of the contemporary ranch house and its rapid spread out of California as one of the basic styles used in suburban residential design largely derive from the pioneering work of Cliff May.

Clifford M. May was born in San Diego, California,





on August 29, 1908. He is a sixth-generation Californian; on his mother's side, he is descended from Spanish settlers who came to California at the end of the eighteenth century. Much of his childhood was spent on the Santa Margarita y Las Flores ranch in northern San Diego County, operated by his aunt Jane Magee. There he grew up with the traditional adobe ranch house architecture of his ancestors which he constantly drew upon for inspiration in his own designs. May has had no formal architectural training, nor is he a licensed architect. He is a building designer and contractor who learned his trade through practice. He planned at first for a musical career and was the leader of a popular jazz orchestra in the 1920s. Because of the jazz group's regular radio broadcasts, May is now a member of Pioneer Pacific Broadcasters. He attended San Diego State College from 1929 to 1931 and primarily took business courses. He withdrew from college without taking a degree and began designing furniture.

After meeting real estate developer R. C. Lichty, May gained the opportunity to design and build a home in the Talmadge Park section of San Diego in 1932. He then designed and built over fifty homes in San Diego for Lichty, O. U. Miracle, and George Marston. In 1937, oilman John A. Smith invited May to move to Los Angeles



and establish a joint partnership to construct homes there. In addition to numerous homes for individual clients, May developed, designed, and built the Riviera Ranch and Sullivan Canyon Ranch projects in West Los Angeles, and Woodacres in Santa Monica.

His ranch house designs have won awards from the National Association of Home Builders in 1947, 1952, 1953. In 1948, one of his homes was featured as a "Pacesetter House" in House Beautiful, and in 1950 Better Homes and Gardens selected another of his ranch houses for the magazine's exhibit on the Avenue of American Homes at the Chicago Lake Front Fair. May received the Award of Merit for Residential Design and Construction from House and Home in 1956, the "Hallmark House" award from House and Garden in 1958, and the Builder of the Year Award from the Congress of Building Contractors Association of California in 1963. He was staff consultant for construction to House Beautiful from 1946 to 1952, president of the Los Angeles division of the Building Contractors Association from 1945 to 1946, director of the division from 1940 to 1950, and member of the Board of Directors of the University of Southern California Architectural Guild from 1974 to 1976. May is the author of two books, Sunset Western Ranch Houses (1946) and Western Ranch Houses By Cliff May (1958).



Among May's better known buildings are the Mondavi Winery and offices in Napa County, California (the design, a reworking and modernizing of California Mission motifs, is featured on the label of Mondavi wines), the Sunset Magazine and Book buildings in Menlo Park, California, the Saga office complex also in Menlo Park, and Hotel Cabo San Lucas in Baja California. Some of the more famous private homes designed by May are the Frederic Blow house in Los Angeles, the John A. Smith ranch in La Habra, California, the K. S. "Boots" Adams home in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, additions to Rancho Tajiguas in Goleta, California, and his own home, Mandalay, in Los Angeles.

May's influence has been felt not so much in particular buildings as in the development of an idiom. His buildings illustrate a rejection of the box-style approach found in traditional American and Northern European architecture in favor of an integration between outdoors and indoors that draws on the Mediterranean heritage of Spanish and Mexican California. He favors single-floor dwellings, the use of natural materials, the arrangement of rooms and openings to tie together indoor room space with patios, courtyards, and gardens to form a single aesthetic and living whole. As May states in this interview, "the floor plans are the way you live in



California." (p. 157) Cross-ventilation, skylights, sliding-glass doors, and the use of wings all serve his oft-stated goal of "bringing outdoor living indoors."

Cliff May has also been an innovator. He has developed new flooring, heating, cooling, lighting, and wall systems. He is the first home builder to use the pullman lavatory. He and his partner Chris Choate designed the nail-on sash. May and Choate were among the first after the Second World War to experiment with modular and prefabricated construction.

Despite May's many accomplishments and achievements, his work has not always been treated seriously by the architectural profession. Similarly, May, a self-made man, in this oral history interview, freely discusses his low opinion of the work and theories of several internationally renowned architects. For May, the purpose of building design and construction remains always ease and comfort of living. He eschews principles of formal symmetry for a flowing design that is arranged around the needs of the men, women, and children who make their home in a Cliff May house.





## INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

Marlene L. Laskey, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Political Science; has researched, organized, and led architectural tours of Los Angeles.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEWS:

Place: May's office in Los Angeles, California.

Dates: Preliminary discussions were held by telephone during March and April of 1982. The recorded interview sessions took place on April 14, May 12, June 9, July 21, September 15, 30, 1982, and January 13, 1983.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: All sessions were held in the afternoon. The duration of the individual sessions ranged from between thirty minutes to one hour twenty-five minutes. A total of six and a half hours of conversation was recorded.

Persons present during the interview: May and Laskey.

### CONDUCT OF THE INTERVIEW:

The interview was designed to follow a generally chronological format, moving from May's childhood to his present activities. This chronological order is frequently interrupted by May's own associations, which move from subject to subject as one remembrance triggers another.

Due to May's busy schedule, several weeks or even months elapsed between sessions. Since it seemed that future appointments would be even more difficult to arrange, Laskey decided to conclude the series in one extensive session which could tie up many loose ends. As a result, the last session covers a wide range of topics and no longer follows the chronological format which characterized the preceding interview sessions.

### EDITING:

Transcribing and editing of this interview were



complicated by the poor sound quality of the original tape recordings. Staff of the UCLA Oral History program checked a verbatim transcript of the tapes against the original recordings and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, spelling, and verification of proper nouns. Words and phrases inserted by the editors have been bracketed. The final manuscript remains in the same order as the taped material.

In June 1983 the edited transcript, along with a list of queries and names requiring identification, was given to May. He made a number of changes and additions, which are indicated in the manuscript. He returned the approved transcript in December 1983.

Richard Candida Smith, principal editor, reviewed the transcript and wrote the introduction. Other front matter and the index were prepared by Teresa Barnett, editorial assistant.

#### SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tapes and edited transcript of the interview are in the University Archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent, noncurrent records of the university. Interview records and research materials are on file in the office of the Oral History Program.



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

APRIL 14, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. May, it seems reasonable that, since you're a sixth-generation Californian, we start the interview with some detailed information about your rather remarkable family history.

MAY: I was first aware that my family had a California history by my mother, Beatrice Magee May, who was very proud of her family. She was the daughter of Victoria de Pedrorena, and Victoria de Pedrorena goes back through her mother, Maria Antonia Estudillo, three generations to Jose Antonio Estudillo, who was born in Monterey in 1805. He built Ramona's marriage place as his own home. It's said that he built it in about 1820. I think that's been debated, and it has never been pinned exactly. [tape recorder turned off]

I'll talk in a little more detail about the Estudillo house later, but I'd like to finish off the family tree. Jose Antonio Estudillo was born in October 1805. He died in July 1855, in San Diego. His father was Captain Jose Maria Estudillo, who came from Spain and was commandante in charge of the San Diego Presidio and Chapel in 1803. Prior to that, he had been the same at the presidio at Monterey.

LASKEY: Did he come from Spain?

MAY: He came from Spain.





LASKEY: With the army or the navy, do you think?

MAY: No, no. To the best of my recollection, he married Maria Horcasitas, who would have been my great-great-grandmother. Then they begat Maria Victoria Dominguez, who was married to Jose Antonio Estudillo. One of their descendants was Maria Antonia Estudillo, who married Miguel Telisfero de Pedrorena, who came from Spain. I do remember my mother telling me that my great-grandfather came from an illustrious family in Spain, and she gave me quite a few papers on the background. I do know that she was very proud of the fact that he had attended Oxford University in England.

LASKEY: This was your great-great-grandfather?

MAY: No, my great-grandfather, Miguel de Pedrorena. Their daughter, [of] Miguel de Pedrorena and Maria Estudillo, was Victoria de Pedrorena, who was born in July 1842, in San Diego, and who died in August 1886.

She married Henry Magee, who was at that time a lieutenant with the New York First Volunteers, who volunteered to go out to California just before the gold strike, the gold rush in 1849. He met Victoria de Pedrorena, my mother's mother, and they were married.

They lived on the ranch, my mother's family property. The family tree says that it was in the North County, which meant the Palomar and Temecula and Las Flores Ranches. The



Las Flores Ranch I'll also talk about later. It's one of the great ranches in California and extended into three counties which later became a part of the state of California. It's the biggest parcel of the famous Santa Margarita Ranch. The full title of the Santa Margarita is the Santa Margarita y Las Flores. My generation, the whole family was raised on the ranch, including me, of which more later.

Back for a moment to the Estudillo house. It was one of the first houses, substantial houses, built in San Diego. It was of adobe walls; they were all three- and four-feet thick. They were made out of native material, like adobe, of course. The tile roofs were made of mud and were baked and burned in the ovens. The construction was what we call shed roofs. It was hard in those days to make what we call valleys, where two sloping roofs intersect on an inside corner. And [it was built in] the U-shape [around a patio]. As a result of the primitive way of shed roofs, shed roofs made the general architectural scheme of the building. The patios were paved with handmade brick, which were burned also. [tape recorder turned off]

In spite of the newly-come-to-the-scene architects that say functional architecture and native building materials are the only way to go, the real truth of the matter is that all of the old California architecture was built that way--functional. The only building material



they had was what they dug out of the ground. The only thing they had to determine the width of the buildings was the length of the poles they could cut out of the trees in the nearby Cuyamaca mountains or in any other area that a building of that time was built. The building materials were what we would call native materials in the entire house, even to the point where, except for glass, which was imported, the rafters and the windows were hewn out of pine from the Cuyamaca mountains. The building fit the contours beautifully. There was no grading done. They merely sloped the building, stepped the building, as the ground fell away. The drainage took care of itself this way.

One of the interesting things is that the first sanitation law that pre-California had was that every building had to be whitewashed once a year. That's why you get lime white adobe buildings. The real true adobe buildings, all the old ranch buildings, you'll find have coat after coat of whitewash, almost to the point where it becomes like a quarter-inch thick plaster that breaks off.

LASKEY: Why was that?

MAY: Well, the lime in whitewash is a disinfectant, and they used it to disinfect the buildings. They had animals that would wet against the buildings, and the men would, and the splash and the plain dirt of the community-- It would be like we would paint our buildings; now we hose



them off. But if you hose an adobe building off--they didn't have hoses in the first place--the adobes wouldn't take the wet. That's why they had the big overhangs to take the water away from the foundations and away from the adobe wall itself. But, anyhow, the whitewash was a part of old California. When you see the newcomers come to California and make an adobe house and leave it natural brown brick, you know that they don't know what they're doing. [laughter] To be really functional and fit the environment, the old way was the right way.

Several other houses were built in San Diego at the same time. But the one that I think lasted and set the pace for many of the ranches to come was the Estudillo house, although many of these houses were building at the same time. Yet there is a unity to them all. There was no architect who designed them. They were built just for the function of housing the people. They were made U-shaped in most cases or around a courtyard completely for protection. It is said of the Estudillo house that they could even open the patio and drive the animals into the courtyard if they had to in case of attack. Many other ranches were built completely that way. The Santa Margarita was. [It stood] on a big hilltop overlooking the whole valley before it, just like an old feudal castle, an old fort. It had a completely enclosed patio on four sides. It was built on





this knoll with a big river that came down behind it and the river going around the building, which was on this great giant knoll. You could see people coming for miles and miles.

I'm digressing now, but I can remember as a child going horseback from the Las Flores Ranch where my aunt lived to over on the coast about ten miles north of the present Oceanside. We'd go by horse and buggy, and riders would lead and follow. It would be an all-day trip with the surrey with two horses and three or four people. Two kids in the back and two up front, maybe three, and a horseman or two. We'd take a lunch and stop along the way. It was a full-day's trip. There were no automobiles that I remember. The first automobile that I remember that came to the Las Flores ranch was an old Overland car which had a top that went up and down like a convertible. It had old isinglass things that you put up in the rain. It had isinglass screens; no windshield wipers; no modern day self-starters--you cranked the car.

My aunt Jane Magee, who was my mother's sister, was the oldest of ten children of Victoria de Pedrorena and Lieutenant Henry Magee. They both died, as the records show, very young. This left my Aunt Jane, who was around thirty-two, to raise the whole young family of mine. And with her, oh, I guess you would call it pioneer



perseverance and her ability, she had made a life time arrangement with Richard and Jerome O'Neil of the Santa Margarita to farm the land, the Las Flores Ranch. She raised "all the children" to womanhood and young manhood, and they all became very successful.

Aunt Jane never married. Her favorite song was "Thank God I'm Free, No Wedding Bells for Me." Poor soul, she had to spend her life raising the children and then the next generation of nieces and nephews. But she loved them very much. Dear Aunt Jane, of course, then she became the hero of all the nephews; there must have been twelve nephews and nieces. Every summer we would go up to the ranch, and she would take care of us. We would wreak all kinds of damage on the place. From stealing the apple pies from the help, to breaking into the storeroom to eat the food, and generally making trouble of ourselves as young people did in those days.

Everybody had his own riding horse on the ranch. In that day they had no Caterpillar tractors to run the machinery and to do the farming. Las Flores was a lima bean ranch. For power they used horses that pulled big wagons. The wagons would go around picking up the stacked dried beans and haul them to the threshing machines. Other horses would drive wheels which would crush--or thresh--the beans out of the bean pods. Very, very primitive. I have



pictures of the old ranch with nothing but horses. That required, of course, stables, and, of course, having stables you had mangers, and mangers had hay. In the hay, you had the chickens, and you had to pick up the eggs. It was just a real country life that all of us went through. I say all of us; I'm speaking of my generation now.

I was born in 1908 in San Diego. Born in the house that my dad built for Mother. I have no recollection of my first trip to Los Flores, but I have pictures that tend to make me recollect going to the ranch on the train. The train was about an hour-and-a-half ride from San Diego.

The trains in those days would stop any place that you had told the engineer to stop; so he would stop either at the Don station or the Las Flores station. You would get off, and then you would be picked up by horse and buggy and taken down to the big ranch house at Las Flores. Those were grand days that we will never have again. Never! If you go out to Australia they still have electricity from generators, and airplanes. But those days we had nothing but the train. Later we had a Greyhound bus that went from San Diego to Los Angeles, and they would stop wherever you wanted to stop. There were no halfway houses, no restaurants on the highway. In 1912, there were no highways! The highways were just two-lanes paved. The two-lane highway went through Las Flores Ranch and is still there.



It is used for the bike riders now, my son Michael tells me. So they use the old highway to get to many places without going on the freeway. I know that they get through the whole Santa Margarita Ranch on this old two-way drive from San Juan Capistrano to Oceanside.

The ranch was a great experience. The Santa Margarita was the biggest of the [ranches]. It was a whole ranch, and it went into three counties. The Santa Margarita y Las Flores was in Orange County, Riverside County, and San Diego County. It was primarily a beef-raising ranch, and that came back from the days of Pio Pico, when the main trade industry in California was rawhide exports from the beef that they had raised. There was no cannery or no ice, so the beef had to be consumed. The hide was the only export that they had at that time. All the ranches raised beef and hides. There's lots of history on that. At Dana Point, they used to dump the hides over the cliffs. That's all history; most people know about that.

All the old families, because of their early arriving upon the scene far before the Americans, had their own ranches. There is a great history [with] the Indians being chased out by the Spaniards, and then the white people tried to chase the Spaniards out. But upon the signing of the declaration of California independence, California through the new federal government set up a land





reclamation for all settlers. I think [this] is all history, but I will pass on it briefly. The land council was formed--the Land Commission. Then you had to prove the use of your land. You gave proof by the house that you lived in; how long you had been there; by witnesses who said they knew how long you had been there; where you were born. Where-you-were-born records were involved. And many, many other items, such as boundaries, if you could identify boundaries, such and such a boundary. The boundaries used to be a mountain top or a tree with a big crack in it. So many times there wasn't anything to prove.

Many families got dispossessed. Many families were able to prove up, and I recall my mother saying how her mother, Victoria de Pedrorena, who had married Lieutenant Magee, had her own separate property, which, I guess, the property laws came back from old Spain and the wife--

LASKEY: Excuse me, Mr. May. Victoria had her property separate from Henry?

MAY: Separate from Henry. It must have come from the old land because it was granted to her; so, as I say, it was her separate property. I have papers that were given to me by friends or Mother, I can't tell which. But most people knew that I was the oldest son of the May family, so I did get more of this kind of paper to take care of. I've taken the responsibility of passing it on to the others. But the



papers I had on the land showed Mother's holdings which were proved up--I guess that would be word--by the Land Commission and given her grant and recorded at the San Diego county recorder were the El Cajon Rancho, which is the biggest [and] is all of the land east of San Diego, one of the great ranches. My dad told me one time how he had looked it up on the books of the county assessor's office---county recorder's office. It was there. I've never seen it although I do have copies from the documents.

Later I was reading an historical book. Mother always told me how they couldn't afford to keep the land although they owned it in fee. The land was so inexpensive that some people would sell their ranches for a dollar an acre. Sometimes it would be more than that. Sometimes they would just lose them. But I didn't realize how they could lose them really until I was reading one of the history books, and it said something that happened to me all my life. The reason [was] that the Magee family, and that would be Mother's--Mrs. Magee, she came from the de Pedrorena, you recall, she was a Magee--that they couldn't afford the lawyers' fees that they charged to do the proving up, so the lawyers got it. Then the lawyers sold it for fees to the rich people who were coming in. I've had so many experiences with lawyers, so I know how some can take over.

LASKEY: That's coming up.



MAY: But it even happened back in the 1800s.

LASKEY: But going back, before we get too far from the Estudillo house, how did it get to be called the Ramona marriage house? Because Ramona, as I understand, was not a real person.

MAY: She was a fictitious person. But she was real in that the thing happened to many people like Ramona, so I think they gave her that name. I think maybe there was a real Ramona, but I think the name was different. Mother speaks of her, that she was raised on the de Lugo ranch, who was another one of the cousins. In fact you will find that in our family that we have cousins all over Southern California. Leo Carrillo to the de Lugos to the Dominguezes--which would be Fritz Burns's wife--and we go on and on. I could make a two-week speech on just the cousins we have. And that goes for all of the old families.

LASKEY: Were you directly related back to the Dominguezes?

MAY: Yes, yes.

LASKEY: Right, your great--

MAY: In fact, I remember visiting one of the Dominguez aunts, I can't remember her name, [Mrs. Carson]. She used to come down every year to Del Mar, take a month's vacation there, and I used to go out to see her at Mother's



insistence, because she believed that we should always keep our family relatives in touch with each other.

The last thing I was talking about was the Las Flores Ranch, and the children, I thought, was the big point there. One thing that did happen in the old days--it doesn't happen like it used to--everybody took care of their own. There were no handouts or people in line for free food. Each family took care of its own.

And when Dad and Mother--and now I'm going to talk about their house very quickly--lived in San Diego, in the house I was born in, it was-- Architecturally, it was a what we would call a Greene and Greene house, but I don't think the people that built it had anything to do with [Charles S.] Greene and [Henry M.] Greene or even knew about them. This was built in 1908. I understand Greene and Greene were starting a little later than that, but [our house] was just a typical California bungalow. Where the plans came from, I don't know, but Dad, I know, had it built. Including the land, I think it [cost] \$3,500. It was built, of course, before they even thought much about automobiles. There was no garage, of course, and I have a picture that shows where the garage was cut in under the house and then walls built to hold the lawn from falling in, because they had to excavate under the house to get the garage in. And when Dad got his first car, which was, I





guess, about 1910, I believe it was an old Saxon. You very seldom hear of them.

But going back to the families taking care of each other and my father's house in San Diego, when it came time for us to go, summertime, when we were big enough to go, we'd get on the train, go out to Aunt Jane's, and when Aunt Jane would come to San Diego, she'd stay with us. We didn't use hotels. And when I'd go to Riverside, I'd stay with my cousin[s] Estudillo. They [were] Miguel and Rex Estudillo, who descended directly from the same Miguel I did, but [they] kept the name, because, see, there were boys all the way. Cousin Rex became one of the top city attorneys for the city of Riverside. When we'd go to Riverside, we'd stay with the Estudillos. Aunt Jane had four sisters and five brothers, making ten all together. And when we'd go to the northern part of San Diego County, we'd stay at Uncle Bill's. He was the major domo for the north end of the Santa Margarita Ranch. And I had another aunt, Aunt Anita, who lived near Idyllwild, at a place called Keen Camp, Keen Camp Post Office. It had a lovely resort there called Tahquitz Lodge. So I lived at Tahquitz Lodge for the summer. My cousins Alice and Louise, Anita's children, would come down to San Diego to go to summer school or to visit. And we'd just change the nephews and



nieces all around the different houses. Everybody who had an uncle or an aunt had a place to go.

And then when the time came for education--I was in grammar school--the older cousins came down to live with my mother and father, and they went to the state normal school. There was no such a thing as exchange of dollars if you stayed, say, five weeks too long. You know the old Spanish saying, "Mi casa es su casa," my house is your house. With ten relatives, and Aunt Jane's, with all the accommodations she had, we had ten places to go. We were just on the move all the time.

As I say, I never knew what poverty was. I never saw [it]. We had hoboes, who lived by-- My Aunt Jane used to say, "Don't go near the railroad track or the hoboes'll get you." [laughter] They were men that used to ride the rails, and we used to be enchanted with these hoboes that we'd see. At the Don station sometimes we'd see them. They'd be camped out there, cooking along the railroad track. I know during World War I they had a very big scare because the IWWs came to the West Coast. The nickname was I Won't Work--but it was the International [Industrial] Workers of the World. And Aunt Jane had them in the same category as gypsies, [laughter] and we didn't want to get caught by the IWW because they'd take us off. We did see gypsies come down the northern road near Las Flores once in



a while, and we were always wanting to keep far away from them because they'd grab us and [our family]'d never see us again.

LASKEY: These are real gypsies?

MAY: They're real gypsies, yes. But that was the only poverty I ever knew. There was the poor part of town, or I should say the not-so-rich part of town, because in San Diego there was no-- The only thing I can remember about being poor in San Diego, they had the Detention Hospital-- No, the Isolation Hospital, that was it. It later became the University Hospital. It was run for people who had tuberculosis and communicable diseases and wanted to get put in one place, and I think they had free doctoring there. But I think that was contributed. There were no taxes for it, I believe. I think the people just paid their way for their relatives that were in there.

LASKEY: Wasn't that how a lot of people came to California and settled, because they were sick and the weather out here?

MAY: Yes, I think, yes. I think a lot of people did. That's why they had places like Soboba Hot Springs. Another aunt owned Soboba Hot Springs. That was Antonia, and she had three daughters: Inez, Nonie (which was Antonia--nickname), and Josephine. So Josephine came down to live with us, Inez came down to live with us, and Nonie



came down to live with us. They all became teachers. Inez, I remember, became actually one of the top teachers in the state of California for delinquent children. She was sought after by all the schools, and she finally wound up in the San Francisco Bay Area. But all she took were children who were hard to teach, stuttered, and couldn't get through school. That's all she taught. But each one of those three sisters became teachers having gone through school [while living] at my mother's house, having gone through the normal school. The normal school later became San Diego State College, and that's where I first went to school, the first college I went to after I graduated from San Diego High. It later moved to its present location further out up the Mission Valley.

Uncle Bill was one of our [really] great uncles. He was a real cowboy. When he was a young man, they say, he could ride horseback full speed, lean over and grab a chicken's head off that had been buried. That was an old California sport--

LASKEY: [grimace] Yes, I know--

MAY: And they did it, and I guess in those days they ate the chickens. So what difference whether you cut it off or grabbed it off? He was very great at that. He was nominated by Ed Ainsworth for the Cowboy Hall of Fame. I think he made it. I think he had passed on by that time. But,





in fact, he was a nominee. He was one of the great cowboys of all time. Western, he was a real western man. He was as great a western man as Aunt Jane was a western woman. He was a great friend of Ed Ainsworth, who was a L.A. Times columnist who wrote several books on him. He had Bill Magee's [Western] Barbecue Cookbook, and Ed Ainsworth ghosted it, and my uncle gave all the information. It was a best-seller.

Then Ed Ainsworth probed into the family history through Uncle Bill, my mother, and the rest of the relatives. Well, he cased the family's history and came up with lots of information. Then he wrote the book called Eagles Fly West, the story of young Henry Magee having heard about California and the chance to join the New York Volunteers. The story starts out him joining up on ship and coming to California and then meeting my great-grandmother. Then the book goes on about the beautiful old days in California. At that time the family had--which I neglected to say--they had holdings all over. But the holdings that they had at this time that I'm referring to was called Condor's Nest, meaning eagle. It was a big side of a mountain just north of the Palomar observatory--the Palomar mountain--and it was a place that all the family went to. And as I say, they had 'ranch to ranch to go to, and Uncle Henry had another big ranch up by Sage, which is south of Hemet.



LASKEY: Now is this still some of Victoria's holdings?

MAY: Yes-- No, no! Victoria's holdings were specifically in the El Cajon. The Sage was purchased by my uncle Henry. Uncle Bill was in the northern part of the Santa Margarita, and Aunt Jane was on the Las Flores.

LASKEY: Now, the original Henry was your grandfather.

MAY: Great-grandfather. And the Henry I just spoke of that bought the ranch in Sage was the son of Lieutenant Henry Magee and Victoria de Pedrorena Magee, my mother's brother. One of Jane Magee's brothers. And there was a Victor Magee who farmed on the Santa Margarita. He ran cattle and raised grain on a big ranch called "Wild Cat," a big holding located between the Santa Margarita ranch house and the Las Flores ranch house and on the main road between these two ranches.

The old days on the Las Flores Ranch when I was a boy and when I was growing up and all my cousins were growing up, [that was] an experience we had that our generations now will never know. Like there was no refrigeration. So on the ranch they had the water tank house, a square house on top of which was the tank. The tank had to be high enough to get enough height for pressure to go down to run the water piping systems. And this tank house was built [for] rural plumbing. All the toilets were outdoor chic sale toilets. And they were very nice and discreetly



located behind planting. They had a three-holer, which would be one for the mother to take her two children in. There would be one with seats halfway down and one all the way down for different heights for different children. There was etiquette about it. It was just a normal way of life. We didn't know what toilets were in the country. Luckily, we in San Diego had the first toilets [with] the big tank high on the wall and the chain to make the toilet go.

But back now to the primitiveness of it. No refrigeration, so the water tank on top of the ice-- Not the ice house, there wasn't any ice then. In Southern California, we didn't know what ice was in those days. The ice, I meant the cold water, dripped from the leaks, and it was on purpose. It had leaks, so the building was always wet, and it dripped down on the cement floor in which there was a drain. And the drip just constantly kept it cool, by evaporation. So the meat was bought once a week.

Aunt Jane--going back to the harvesters, and there was no equipment except horses and laborers--had to feed fifteen, twenty, thirty men at high harvest time. At planting there'd be fifteen men, and it would go down to six or seven men between seasons. So the meat came out in big quantities. The fun used to be to get at the end of



the buckboard and hitch up a horse to the 4-wheel buggy (buckboard), and we'd go off to get the meat.

Well, the supplies would be sent up from San Diego on the train. The trains ran on schedule, so at 10:30, the 10:30 train would come through. You'd take an hour to get to the station. You'd get there and play around until you heard the train coming. When it came, it whistled a couple of times to let them know that they were going to slow up. They'd slow up, and without stopping they would dump big, big chunks off, sewed in burlap, that would go bouncing around down the railroad track, on the side of the track. We'd go pick them up and get them in the buggy and bring them home.

Aunt Jane had a Chinese cook and [his] wife that were there their whole lifetime. He was there when I became conscious of what a cook would be. Maybe [I was] three or four years old. He and his wife, Kim and See, lived there their whole adult lifetimes on Aunt Jane's ranch until they retired many years later. Their son, Toy, his nickname, his name was Harry [Young], he became a very prominent merchandiser of fresh produce at the Los Angeles public market, which has made him a fortune. I, incidentally, built a home for him. But we grew up as kids and have been friends ever since.





The Chinaman would-- I shouldn't call him that, but he was a Chinaman. He had a Chinese wife, but he would call dinner. The first bell of the evening would be one bell, a warning bell, one long bell. That meant for all the workers to get washed up, that dinner would be served in ten or fifteen minutes. We wouldn't pay any attention to that bell. Then the long bell would ring and ring and ring. He'd pull the big ranch bell on the outside with the rawhide rope that came through a hole in the wall; the board in the kitchen was only one board thick. He'd pull it from the inside. And then all the workmen would come into a long mess hall, just one table wide and maybe fifty feet long. They would troop in and they would be fed on benches built to the table. The table had benches on both sides. And he would serve them as fast as he could. He did a good job of it.

LASKEY: And what was his name?

MAY: His name was Kim.

LASKEY: Kim.

MAY: And his wife's name [was] See. Kim and See. And the last name was Young. That's where we get Harry Young. And it's Kim Young and See Young.

At the time of the first bell-- We didn't work, so the workmen came first, not the family. The workmen first because we depended on them. So as soon as he could get



them all fed, then he would ring a warning bell, two bells--bing, bing--and that meant that we had about two minutes to get to the dining room. By the time we got there, Kim was serving.

I'll never forget one time he had been there for many, many, many years, and I was at the ranch this one time. It seemed that I lived at the ranch most of my life, which I will tell you again about the architecture. But this day he rang the first bell for the workmen. And all [of a] sudden the second bell for the family who were waiting. And only one ring was heard. He usually rang two for the family notice. All of a sudden the door to the patio flew open, and Kim came running down the corridor. He had a piece of the rawhide rope in his hand. And he said, "Missy, Missy, Missy Jane! Ring bell! Ring bell! Pull, pull! Bell no holler!" Anyhow we got through that meal. [tape recorder turned off]

Well, back to the ranch. The construction and the architecture of the ranch was built, I think, in 1840. [That's] the Las Flores Ranch, and it was built like all ranches--functional. Adobe, and "U" shaped, with a second story, with balconies like Monterey, [with] a tile roof at one time because there used to be old tile stacked up when they changed the roof to a shake shingle roof later.



But the most important thing on the ranch was, of course, the kitchen. There were no bathrooms, except the outhouses. The great big important room was put on the main court right next to Aunt Jane's room, where it could be watched. It was the provision room; the storeroom, they called it. In the storeroom were sacks of beans and sacks of rice and sacks of flour. All the things like a great store. And Aunt Jane had the key to it. Nobody got in except when Kim came, and then he was given the key. And he opened it for what he wanted; then he locked it up. And it was filled with prunes and dried apples, for apple pie was a piece de faire for the workmen. Every night apple pie or prune pie. The meat was kept in the meat house, and that was kept locked. The provision [room] and the kitchen were the main important rooms, and Aunt Jane's room down the open corridor was right next to them on the ground porch level.

Then there was a big two-story section, with a living room downstairs and a two-story fireplace. All rooms were heated by fireplaces. Every room had a fireplace. They had a man who was just a groundsman. All he did was keep wood in the fireplaces, and he kept the leaves raked up on the patios, kept them clean. And he also raised a small garden.



Everybody had a job to do. They had the foreman who ran all the men. And they had the manager, my uncle Louis, who never married. He later came to live at Aunt Jane's, and he ran the ranch for her. He also became her business manager. It came to the point where she had to-- Uncle Percy Johnson, her original manager, who was my aunt Antonia's husband, was quite a prominent man. He ran and won as assemblyman for the state of California early in the old days. And when Aunt Jane got to the point where she was getting older and needed more help, then Uncle Louis came down and ran the ranch for her. Then Percy died. And [there was] a big family funeral I'll never forget. We as family have always stuck together like families seldom do now.

Then Uncle Louis gave up what he was doing and came to manage the ranch for Aunt Jane. And he managed the ranch for her, planting, harvesting, stable management, black-smithing, commissary, maintenance. There was lots of management to do--payrolls, fights, people not showing up, workmen getting drunk, selling the beans at a profit, knowing when to sell the beans [or] hold the beans stored in the warehouse. They had a tremendous big warehouse at Don station, where they would sack and store the beans. And then how to select out and store the seeder beans for the next year. They had the best beans. They got better





beans by rotating the crop. There's a tremendous science to running a big ranch. Aunt Jane had all that at her fingertips, and she was able to direct her brothers how to do it. Taught them how.

LASKEY: How many square miles was that?

MAY: That was big. The Las Flores went from the-- I can't say, I would only be guessing, but it went from, oh gee, ten miles north of Oceanside where the Las Flores ranch began and about five to eight miles north. Then the Barnard ranch began; Fred Barnard was another lessee. Aunt Jane was a lifetime lessee of the Las Flores Ranch--a lessee on a handshake, no more than that. Barnard had two brothers. One was north of Aunt Jane and one was south. The Barnard north went broke eventually, and Aunt Jane took over his lands. So it made more land. But she was known at the time, at her time, as the biggest--by the biggest I mean the greatest--number of lima beans ever raised on any one ranch. She was called the "lima bean queen" of California. She had these big sacks. We used to get paid--

Oh! That is another thing I think is important. We all learned how to work very young. As soon as we were able to work, why, we had jobs. I remember one of the jobs that I had was to go out in the fields and pick up beans that had-- Where they stacked the beans to dry from green cutting, they cut them green and put them in stacks, and



then they'd come and pick them up with the wagons and throw them in the wagons. The wagons would be lined with rope nettings, so that when they went up to the thresher they would pull up the rope netting and all the beans would come up and drop into the hopper. But there would be tons of beans left behind that dried and popped from the pods before they picked them up. When they stuck the pitchfork in to put them into the wagon, the beans would drop. So we kids would get the job of going out and picking up beans in a sack, and we would get paid so much a sack. We'd just pick beans all day long and loved it. We learned to enjoy work, and then we got paid for it, which is even better.

Dear Aunt Jane-- I was saying about the number of sacks she put out. These great big stacks of sacks, originally, they had no name on them. So she got this brass stencil that they had that said, "Jane Magee Lima-beans, Las Flores Ranch." Fifty pound [sacks], one hundred pounds. And then we'd take a big old black brush with black paint; we'd scrub through the thing and paint the sacks and stack sacks for her. We worked in the warehouse helping to sew sacks. And we worked with the threshing machine helping shove the beans in, and we'd work with the threshing machine, catching the beans in the sacks and then shoving them on to another man to do the sewing. When we were younger and couldn't work, we'd ride with the wagons



picking up the beans. We were always out in the fields, always working with the land. Then coming home exhausted and tired for a good night's sleep.

In those days, no drinking. Nobody drank. When I said drinking, a workman would once in a while get some booze or something. It wasn't serious. The family men seldom drank. Women never drank. Women never smoked. It was just a happy kind of pastoral life that you just can't imagine.

Then the friends would come. The holidays, all the family would come to Las Flores. We'd go to Easter and Christmas masses at San Luis Rey or San Juan Capistrano Mission. By this time that I'm talking about, the automobiles had come, and everybody at the ranch was always equipped with the best of equipment, their automobiles, and my dad finally had a better car. And we'd go to Easter one year at San Luis Rey mission, and the next year at Easter we'd be up at San Juan Capistrano. [tape recorder turned off]

Those same churches, missions-- We were all raised in the missions. We knew all the fathers. The fathers would come to visit Aunt Jane. With the thick walls and the deep sanctuaries and the tile floors and the tile roofs, [the missions] were all just a part of our boyhood and childhood. And girlhood as the girls grew up. My mother and



father were married in the San Luis Rey mission, and I was married in the old San Diego mission in 1932.

I mean, to me, ranch living was just the only way to go. It was spread out. You had cross-ventilation in every room and a fireplace in every room. Every room had privacy. The walls were thick. You couldn't hear people. You couldn't hear noise. You had shutters you could close up and make it dark if you wanted to sleep. And if you wanted privacy at night, you close up. You close up because you knew there was no-- We didn't have burglars like we do now, but we had the gypsies, of course, and we kept locked up for that reason.

But, the ranch house was a functional building with its outbuildings. The blacksmith's shop was in the right place where the machinery could pull up without disturbing the occupants of the ranch. The barns with the odors and the manure smells and molding hay that would get wet and have to be thrown out would not disturb the ranch living. The ranch was in the path of the ocean breezes. It was a functional ranch.

I had a friend point out once--and he's right and I know it's right and I've often said it--the reason you never see an ugly barn is that a barn is built for horses. For functional use. You see all kinds of ugly houses, because they're built for people without function. They





don't care; they just make them look funny. The barn is made to spend not a nickel more than you need to house the horse or the cow and feed. And the most beautiful architecture, I think, are the cow barns and the horse barns of California. You never see a bad barn! You never see a bad barn. So think of that with some architects that go out and spend all their time making "boxes for living" look good-- All facade. No plan. No function. No out-of-door living.

Again to the ranches, we started in with the Estudillo house. I'll digress back to it and your question about Ramona. Ramona was a real person, that I'm sure. Mother used to tell me about her. She knew she was really not married in the Estudillo house. Mrs. Helen Hunt Jackson picked the Estudillo house, because she visited there when she came out and she was a guest and decided it was such a beautiful place. And Father Gaspar, I think, was the name in the book. I think he's a-- Mother spoke of him. I digress very much but I'll get back to it.

One of the books on San Diego, [William E.] Smythe-- This shows you how history is written. At the time Smythe was the greatest historian of San Diego. He has two volumes of the history of San Diego, volumes one and two, red books. Mother gave me her copies of them, Beatrice A. May in her handwriting in the front when they were given to



me. And in the books, it tells about part of her family, and it tells about one relative who had two daughters. And Mother scratched it out and said, "Smythe is wrong; there were three daughters. Victoria [was left out]."

[laughter] And in another place she corrected Smythe. So the point is that history picked up Smythe and went on, so Victoria was lost forever because this writer didn't know his history. I came across that in the book [The History of San Diego, six volumes] put out just recently by [Richard] Pourade, editor-emeritus of the San Diego Union, published by the San Diego publishing company of San Diego Union-Tribune. What is it?

LASKEY: Copley?

MAY: Copley Press. And in that book, I picked it up and they listed the same person, with two daughters, and at a later date, why, they had three daughters. Even they were in conflict, but it was three daughters according to Mother. Because she knew, of course.

LASKEY: It's interesting that it got corrected because usually when the mistakes are--

MAY: It wasn't corrected. In the book, it's wrong one place and correct in the other.

LASKEY: I thought it was the newer edition that had the three?



MAY: No, no. In the only edition they have, they have the name and then they say he had two daughters and then the next, way down the line, it said he had three daughters. So the proofreader had forgotten and missed it.

LASKEY: Oh, I see.

MAY: But, the three daughters was correct. Nobody knows that except when I get the history down. The three daughters were Antonia, Maria, Victoria.

It became just known by hearsay that this was Ramona's marriage place, whether it was or not.

But, the Estudillo house was in great disrepair. Jose Antonio Estudillo left the house in his later years, and he was a very young man at the time. I think he died in 1852 [and] left it to a Mexican to take care of. The Mexican promptly let everybody take anything they wanted. They just desecrated it. So, by 1900, it was a mess. Just walls, and the roof had caved in, and it was in real bad shape.

The Spreckels Company had great interests in San Diego. One of them was the streetcar line. The streetcar, I remember very clearly, the only way I could get around San Diego when I was a young boy, I used the streetcar. The streetcar went out to Old Town, and then it went out to Loma Portal and Ocean Beach and ended. Then it went out to South San Diego to National City, where, I think, it ended.



Then [it] went up to Normal Heights where the old normal school was and ended right there at the ostrich farm. I think Spreckels built the ostrich farm so that at the end of every railroad there'd be something to get off and then see, and so they'd get another fare going back or have a place to go, otherwise you wouldn't get the fare. So, anyhow, that was the idea.

So, they [the Spreckels Company], took Ramona's marriage place and said they'd rehabilitate it and make it a museum. They did, and they hired this wonderful Mrs. [Waterman]. She measured the old foundations, took all the major dimensions of the house, took the grades. The walls were caved in. She'd talk to the people. She found out that one person had said it had a balcony where the band used to play. And that was from my cousin by marriage, Cave Coutts. And then, I think, it turned out to be later that they didn't have the balcony; it had been added later. But they still put one up. There were few photographs for the old building, of course, but there were old drawings that are shown in the volume by Pourade, The Golden Dons. So, she made the only architectural drawings that were ever made.

And her name is Hazel Waterman, Mrs. Waldo Waterman. It is said her son was the first to fly a power-driven airplane lighter than air. He beat the Wright brothers,





but he didn't have any publicity on it. He flew out at Otay Mesa. I guess that's pretty well established in history now, that he was the first one. Anyhow, he was one of the pioneers for sure. But I think the Wright brothers got off and got more publicity on the thing. Prior to that time, according to several sources, he was said to have flown on the Otay Mesa. With the big, strong winds out there, he got up and did fine.

The building was then re-created by Mrs. Waterman and brought back. I have many different types of pictures from it. Mother gave me a wonderful book of the old [house], when it was first refinished in 1909. I believe it was published in 1909. So between 1900 and 1909 it was built.

Many years later, Mrs. Waterman gave me a call and said that she knew of my relationship to the house, and she would like very much to have me have the original drawings. So she gave them to me. When a friend of mine knew that I had them, architect Sam Hamill from San Diego, who is very active in the San Diego Historical Society, he called me and said he thought it'd be a great idea if I would give them to the San Diego Historical Society because they had a museum, the Serra [Historical] Museum, which was built by Mr. George Marston in the Presidio Hill park overlooking Old San Diego and the Estudillo house. So, I gave them to the Historical Society, and I kept an original set of



tracings for [myself]. No, I gave them the originals, and I kept the tracings. In fact, I originally gave them the tracings, but they said they wanted the originals. So I switched and I have the tracings.

LASKEY: Oh! [laughter]

MAY: And it's best to be there. It shouldn't be in my collection. More people can see them. More students and historians can read it there.



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

MAY 12, 1982

LASKEY: Let's spend some time now, Mr. May, talking about your father's family and your father.

MAY: All right. I've never traced the family very far back other than the information that was given to me by Dad. He did say jokingly at times that we were related to Pocahontas, whether that was a joke or not-- I think it probably was.

But, the first trace of my grandfather, who was Charles E. May, was that he was born on January 7, 1839, [at] Indianapolis, Indiana. He was one of a family of six children. Then, his family moved to Burlington, Iowa when he was a young boy.

Dad has told me many tales about his father. In fact, he used to entertain all the young boys in the neighborhood, sitting on our front porch on long summer nights, he would tell the stories of crossing the plains that his father had told him. The dates that Dad gave me was that his father was about twenty years old when he left Iowa to come to California or to come West. And that would make it about 1859 or 1860 that he came across the plains. I remember there were two routes to the covered wagon, the northern route and the southern route, as I've seen on some of the old maps. According to Dad's information he gave



me, he came to Salt Lake City on the way, which means he probably took the northern trail or the central. I think there was another trail which crossed up into the Washington-Oregon country. But he apparently took the central trail or whatever trail that took him to Utah, then to San Francisco, and then he came on to Los Angeles. One of the notes that Dad gave me was that when he arrived land that is now downtown was selling for twenty-five cents an acre, if you can believe that.

In 1868, he came to San Diego from San Francisco on the steamer Orazabo, which I've seen written up a number of times in some of the old historical [journals], one of the coastal boats. He came down with a man named [William] Jeff Gatewoods, who, Dad said, later founded the San Diego Union, which was the major paper in San Diego.

My grandfather, Charles E. May, went into the harness and saddlery business. Dad had an advertisement that he had gotten from one of the first issues in the Union that Grandpa May had put in about his saddlery and harness shop, and it said,

"Always on hand and for sale."

He had saddles and bridles and harness and lines, collars, whips, spurs, and so forth.





"Repairing done with neatness and dispatch, shop on West Side San Diego Avenue near courthouse, Old Town San Diego, October 10, 1868.

Something I was very proud of from when I was a little boy was a great big full-sized wooden horse that was on the saddlery company downtown. When I was a boy, there were still lots of horses around and used for hauling the grocery [and] vegetable carts that came out to the house, which was a novelty I've never seen since. We also had the ice wagons pulled by horses, and nearly all the trucking when I was a small boy [was] done with horses. So I guess horse repair and saddle business was pretty good, harness especially. There was this great big, wooden horse. It was life-sized, and it had a regular tail, a regular horse's tail fastened on and a horse's mane. It was painted to look like quite a horse. And that was put on four wheels and a platform, and it was pulled out everyday and put on the sidewalk in front of the saddlery shop. This was not my grandfather's shop, but it was his horse. It had been for his shop. And when he passed on, whoever bought the saddlery business kept it, and it was still there. I was always proud of the fact that my grandfather had had a big wooden horse.

There's not too much about Grandfather except that he did buy a number of properties. He owned quite a few houses that he rented. I remember later, as I became more



aware of what was going on-- My grandfather died I think before I was born, but my German grandmother, she inherited the houses that Grandfather and she had bought and had rented. She lived in one, but I was given the job of "maintenance man." I got a little bit of early carpentry, putting in the screens that would be knocked out and fixing doorknobs that wouldn't work. And I remember going down a number of times and redoing the screens. They seemed to go out the fastest. I made pocket money taking care of Grandma's houses. The houses were in a part of town that later became the east end of town, which wasn't the great area that the north [became].

Incidentally, in all cities, the west is where the great improvement-- Nearly all the cities in the United States grow to the west. Like West Brooklyn is more valuable than East Brooklyn. I've never been there, but that is what they would tell me. And West Los Angeles is more valuable than East Los Angeles, obviously. In Santa Monica, the ocean property is more valuable than Santa Monica inland and east. But anyhow, the houses Grandma May owned were in the east part of San Diego. [They] never amounted to very much.

Dad went to work. He worked for the San Diego gas and electric company all of his life. He started as a clerk and wound up being one of the vice-presidents. As a young



man, he was quite a ladies' boy, or a woman's man, whatever you call it. Ladies' man. He said that he was one of the fast typists of San Diego and used the touch system then. He had a pretty girl's picture under every key. [laughter] You couldn't see the letters, but you could see their faces. I have a few pictures of him that are rather nice, on the beach, with his violin, and he had real curly hair. He was a handsome, young fellow. He met Mother, I think, quite young in life. They were both born in San Diego.

For many years, I had a big play chest that was very German and had carvings all over it, with flags and emblems, lions and tigers and-- Not tigers but dragons, with long gold tongues sticking out and red eyes. Anyhow, I was later told that was the bench on which my dad had proposed to my mother. And it was owned by a-- In those days, there was only one doctor that I became aware of, it was Dr. Valle. But it was in the doctor's home, and they met there. And so he [Dr. Valle] gave Mother the chest. Then the chest became mine, for my toys, which I had all kinds of, being a lucky youngster with lots of relatives to donate things from time to time.

Very early in their life, they built their house. Dad, I guess, had good judgment, picking out things, attitude--that's not the word--but he had the ability to decide where the best place to live would be. And so instead of



going west at that time, [which] would be miles over to Point Loma, which would have been great but it was just too far, because I think in those days when they built, the streetcar determined where you lived. So, the streetcar to what would be, when I say, the west, the best part, was really down along the fringes along the bay and all the way to Old Town, and it wasn't the best part of town. Old Town had gone into decline by 1900. Dad was there earlier than that. But, he went north, and then he went west. By going west he got onto what was known as Bankers' Hill, I think so called because two or three bankers lived out there and had some big, beautiful homes.

Dad picked out a little side street called Albatross. It was on what we now call a cul-de-sac or dead-end street. It was unpaved for many years, which was great because it gave us a chance to play ball in the dirt street, and we had a turnaround at the end. There were just four houses on the street. There was one family who became my best friends, Styris. This is going to come in later because Mr. Styris, Sr., was one of the great master craftsmen of San Diego. There was one house in between us, the Babcocks. Then there was the house of the Strawns just north of our house, and then one on the corner, people called the Marshalls. The Marshalls were the richest





people on the block. The rest of the people were all working people.

The Marshalls had the first automobile. I'll never forget it. It was an electric [car], and in the cab was a place to put rosebuds on the side of the window, and a bar steered it. There was no such thing as garages when these houses were built, so Mr. [John] Marshall built a garage. A big box of a place to run his car in. We used to marvel how he drove down the street with his big electric car. It looked like a showcase on four wheels.

LASKEY: What year was that?

MAY: That would be about my first remembrance, and you see I was not born until 1908. So it would be 1912 or '13. I was three and four years old I remember.

LASKEY: Well, how large was San Diego at this time?

MAY: Oh, less than 100,000. Maybe 80,000. I'm just guessing.

The automobile is another-- I'll come back to automobiles.

But that lot ended our street. Across the street was a big canyon. [The] slope started from right across the street. Dad had a great view. He looked out across the cul-de-sac out into the canyon. The Styris lived furthest down south on the side of the canyon. They had a cow and a shed for the cow and chickens. They did not have



a car either. No one had a car except the Marshalls; the others came later.

We had great experiences though, because there were two brothers, Eli and Herbert, and then a sister in between. No, the baby was Linia. They were very strict Swedish people whose father demanded obedience, and they each had their jobs to do. They all had to work. Mr. Styris was really, as I say, a master builder and also sort of a genius. He had a roof that he built that had gutters around it, especially kept clean. The boys had to get upon the roof twice a year to clean them. All the water went into a cistern, a big cistern he had dug under the house on the side of the hill. It had an old-fashioned pump that you pumped up and down. Later, progressive as he was, he got a chain pump that you could crank, that would pump the water out. I remember as a child going down to the cistern, which was open to the Mays because we were great friends, and pumping two pitchers of water, which we always drank, fresh cistern water, because water systems weren't as great as they are now. They didn't have the dams and piping that they now have.

The Styrises raised their own vegetables. They had their own fruit trees. They had loquats, loganberry, and sapotas, which is a Mexican plant, a great big tree, big enough for us kids to climb in and eat them, more sapotas



than you could eat. [They had] all their vegetables in neat little rows. They furnished vegetables to the community. They had their own lawn and a very comfortable three-story hillside house on approximately two acres. [They had] a hammock out in back; the hammock overlooked the canyon and the big trees they had planted there. They had a beautiful view. It was a wonderful house.

I remember Mr. Styris was very thrifty, so he would draw his tub of water and he would bathe in it and leave it all day to let it settle. Then he would drain it out rather than fill it with warm water and bathe again. [laughter] That was all the water they got. I think all the water they got was from the rainwater until they got their water system in.

Mrs. Styris was a wonderful person. She was a great cook, and she always had food for the kids. And I was one of the family, as were they of our family.

The Strawns had one boy named Spencer, who was a part of the gang.

Across the street up to the north were the Fleets. They were an old family. They had a young son named Arnold, who was my good friend, and his older sister about my age named Gertrude. Gertrude was the most athletic of all of us. She was the only one of us who knocked the baseball through her father's screened porch across the



street on a home run. Many years later, I designed a home for her husband and her in Santa Anita Oaks. We had great times. There was no theft in the neighborhoods. There were no thoughts of mugging or anything like that. Everybody left their doors open. There was no such thing as robbery. There was no such thing as worrying at night. We'd sleep with the windows open and the doors open. I'd go down to the Styrises, and I'd walk in and yell for my friends. They wouldn't be home, so I'd go home and figure they hadn't got home yet and Mrs. Styris wasn't there. I was welcome to come in anytime. It worked the same with all the houses in this small neighborhood.

One interesting thing, I'm jumping again, but the neighborhood Dad picked-- The opposite side of the street, I said it went over the hill. There was no place to build a house. But just before, opposite the second house down, we were the third, so Dad could look on out to the view.

During the [Panama-California International] Exposition, Mr. [Irving] Gill, who was one of our great architects from San Diego, was commissioned by the exposition committee to build four demonstration homes, which he built as part of the exposition of 1914. [loud noise] It was opened, one of the two, and then it was--it was '16--I think the building got started in '14 to get them finished for the exposition.





Incidentally, Gill had been hired to be part of that team with Bertram Goodhue. Nobody seems to know what happened. I have read in Mr. [George] Marston's book that he was originally on the design team with Goodhue. Apparently he designed the Balboa bridge because it certainly has his complete mark with the Gill arches. But somehow Mr. Gill didn't get in on the rest of the exposition. Goodhue took over, and Mr. Gill did not do it. But these houses were done in the true Gill manner. So, here we had four wonderful Irving Gill houses.

I knew Mr. Gill, as a child would know an older man. He had a daughter, as I mentioned earlier. Bonnie was her name. I admired her from a distance for many years. I don't think she ever knew I existed. We visited the Gill house quite often because they and the Styrises were very friendly. The reason they were very friendly was this, I spoke of Mr. Styris as being a very fine cabinetmaker and master craftsman, a master builder. In those days, architects needed master builders to execute their drawings, because their drawings were not as complete as they are nowadays. They would do a set of stairs, and then the master builder worked out the stairs on the job. Without Mr. Gill, Mr. Styris would not have the job. Without Mr. Styris, Mr. Gill would not have the house finished. It was a mutual operation. And to my knowledge, every job Mr.



Gill did, Mr. Styris was on the job as the master craftsman and carpenter.

As a result, Mr. Styris had built a wonderful big basement under the whole house that was filled with carpenter benches and all kinds of tools that we, as children, had the right to use. He had his tools which we couldn't touch, but he had tools for the boys. He had vises and drills and hammers and saws and wood mallets and chisels and coping saws and everything an expert would need. He had tools for his sons and his sons' friends, if they treated them properly. The two boys had the two bedrooms down off the shop, downstairs, that would be on the Albatross Street level. At the lowest level was the storeroom for the feed for the cow and the sheep and the pigs and the chickens and all the animals they had. They would feed them in the stable in the canyon. Anyhow, we learned a lot of carpentry from Mr. Styris and from [his] boys, who were very proficient.

Back to the time with Gill, Mr. Gill building those houses, we played in those houses as children. You know, an empty house [under construction], you'd jump out the window and be up on the roof and in the attic. I just had an awareness of Gill's feeling of arches, and yet when I look back, they were typical houses. They weren't houses like my people did. When I speak of my people, [I mean]



the old California. They were not adobe. They were not on one floor. They did not have patios. They were true boxes, two-story boxes.

One of my best friends lived in one up from my house. Robert Churchill lived in the house, which would be across from the Marshall house. I knew that house backwards. We played in it while it was being finished, and I practically lived there with Bob as his best friend after it was finished. [He was] one of my best friends. The house was distinctive. You knew that it had been done by an architect.

It had forced air-- No, it didn't have forced air in those days. It just had what they call gravity heat. In those days they did it with wood. You built a wood fire in the furnace, and it had ducts going up to the rooms. It's gravity; the rising heat would take it up to the rooms and heat them. Later on we had gas, but not in those days. Originally it was all wood.

We had a one-car garage. In those days nobody ever aspired to having two cars, and everybody just built one-car garages.

LASKEY: When was this now?

MAY: This was before '15, about '15. These were built in '14. Dad's house was built in 1906 because I was born in 1908. There was no garage provided for.



One day, we got the big news. Dad was coming home with a big surprise. Mother had me waiting for the big surprise. Dad came driving home; I think it was in a Saxon car. Never heard of now, but it was a flimsy old car. All of them were flimsy in those days. [laughter] It wasn't a Ford though, but we had to park it in the street.

So immediately Dad said we were going to build a garage. He had to excavate the whole lawn in front of the house and expose all the foundations, which didn't go down deep enough. They had to cut back and underscore the foundation. They cut one opening into the foundation and formed it so they could dig out underneath the house. Then they put foundation walls all around inside, retaining walls, so they could drive the car in. Then the doors, they didn't have garage doors pivot like they do now. So the doors were hinged, and you had a regular front-door lock on it with a key, a door knob. You'd open two doors, and then hope they wouldn't blow shut on you. Then you drove in, and then you locked the doors.

Under the house at that time, we had a door going up, an excavated space where we later put in a furnace. In the meantime, the only heat in the house was a fireplace, as I remember, and, maybe, some little electric heaters. And then, one day, we got floor furnaces, when the gas came. And by having this access under the house and the door, we





had a nice place to store Christmas tree ornaments on dirt under the house. It was dry, and we could put [in] wood platforms. Mother had all kinds of things stored there. It was always fun to play in the basement. There was always something to find down there.

LASKEY: Basements were unusual, weren't they, in Southern California?

MAY: Yes, they were. But in this case, we dug a basement for the automobile. And then the rest was just the underpinning. The part you dug out to get to open the door because you couldn't open the door in because you'd hit the car.

LASKEY: So it was just an added benefit from having a garage.

MAY: You're right. There were few basements. There were just crawl spaces, they'd call them. Except on hillsides. On hillsides sometimes people dug in and made a basement, or like the Styris, they had a third of the third floor below as a lower terrace for their cow. And halfway up was the real basement, which was where the two boys slept, with windows because it was not under the ground. Only half was underground. The carpenter shop was on that same floor, and then the top floor was where the owner lived. He had a master bedroom, a dining room, a kitchen, and a service porch. Outside, where the well was, was kind of a little



patio. And then they had a living room. So they had just one bathroom upstairs, and doors all the way through so you could make a complete circle. Our house was built the same way. You could go from the living room through the bedroom through the bathroom through the bedroom through the living room. The typical plan of those days. The Gill plans were a little more superior to that, they were more expensive houses.

Dad's house cost \$3,500 when he built it, and I think the lot was \$1,000. And when my stepmother died, why I think, we sold it for about \$50,000. It was ten times, but it was mainly because of the land, the location. But the house served well. I get the feeling of--- We always had mission furniture, and that was the big fashion at that time.

Mother had these wonderful Indian rugs made by the Navajos. They were bright reds, greens, and whites, and blacks. Each one a different design. And Dad was always so proud of the fact that they were so imperfect, which proved that they were made by real Indians. They would start out a Z, and the Z would wind up an X [laughter] someplace else. They were just filled with errors, and that was his great pride. Many years later I found out that that was just the opposite; the poor Indians that didn't have any education and were sort of dumb or were not



all there--who didn't have all their marbles--were the ones that wove the ones that were so funny. [laughter] So, the really valuable [rugs] were the perfect ones.

LASKEY: And wrecked his theory.

MAY: Nowadays the collectors are always going for the perfect rug. But in architecture we try to make our architecture not perfect. I mean, we like to have it asymmetrical, and, if we have a little wave or bump in the eave line, we like it better, and if the plaster is put on carelessly and randomly so it doesn't look machine made. You take a Navajo rug that looks like it's been made by a machine, why, it doesn't have handcrafted value. To me, I would value the handmade so much more than I would machine made.

But, anyhow, we had mission furniture.

Then the world progressed, and inventions came, airplanes came, and the telephone came. We didn't have a telephone when we first moved in. I remember that coming. A big deal! Stretching the wires.

LASKEY: When was this?

MAY: It would to be when I was big enough [to remember]. That must have been maybe 1912 or '13. I think the lights were on. The lights were on. I remember when my cousins from the country would come to visit us, the big thrill was



that they got permission to turn the lights off and on, because they were all used to using lamps, coal oil lamps.

There were other improvements that did come along, of course. One day, the first GE refrigerator came. I don't know what date that was, but it was such a big, wonderful thing. It had a big coil up on the top. Guaranteed forever. And then the washing machine came, and we had laundry tubs installed on the back porch. Then they got the electric washing machine. Refrigeration was here now, and then later models came. Then the stoves, the old gas stove, then you got later models of gas stoves with better ovens. Dad constantly upgraded the house, so it was always comfortable.

LASKEY: How long did you live there?

MAY: I lived [there] until I was married. I went through San Diego State [College] there. I had my orchestra practice there. A little, tiny living room, we'd get five guys in there. Dad would get his violin and make us tune up. I always wanted to get rid of him. I don't know why he was always trying-- [laughter]

I think back now how much good he did for us. [laughter] But one good thing about Dad, he made me toe the mark, and I could never please him. He never-- Anything I did wasn't good enough. It always could be done better.





Later on, on the radio, I had my own band, and we were one of the early, early orchestras that had a sponsor. We played, and our sponsor was the Hercules Gasoline Company. We had two nights a week over KFSD, which was the major broadcasting station; the second one was KGB. My high school and college friend Art Linkletter worked on KGB as an announcer, but we played our band out of KFSD, which was on the roof of the U. S. Grant Hotel. We were one of the first dance bands (1925) to have a theme song, "Thanks for the Buggy Ride." We would play a program. I would come home. And Dad would have tuned in the crystal set listening to us. And he'd say, "You played too loud. You played too much jazz. You should stick to melody more. Keep the tunes, so the people listening to you hear the tunes, so they'll know what you're playing. You mustn't just go all crazy like you're doing."

So, I never did things well enough. But I look back now, and it's the thing that made me keep on wanting to go--"What makes Sammy run." These parents who say, "Oh, you're so wonderful," you know, and the kid slows up. I'm just sure of that. And those who endow them with lots of money and say, "Look, son, you've earned it." But I've never seen very many of them ever amount to much. But anyhow, I'm glad Dad was the way he was.



Mother was the same way-- No, she was understanding. Dad was always the ogre in the family. Mother was sweet and lovely, but she had one thing wrong with her which was tough on everybody. When I was a bad boy, instead of taking care of it right then, why, she'd say, "Wait till your father comes home. He's going to punish you."

I went up to the streetcar to meet my dad every night, whether I was good or bad. But, one day I ran up to meet him-- Many spankings later this occurred, maybe a couple of years of spanking. He had a razor strap that he would get out, and, boy, I got it. But anyhow, Dad left the streetcar, and we walked home together. He came home real happy, until he found out he had to do his terrible duty, to give me a spanking. Which I thought was really bad for raising children, but I didn't realize this until afterwards. It didn't hurt me any, didn't hurt me any, but I said to him as he got his strap, I said, "Tonight you can hit me as hard as you want, but you can't make me cry."

So he said, "Well, that's enough. I won't hit you anymore."

So he quit.

I don't know why I bring that up, but it was just interesting because it didn't hurt me, at least as far as I was concerned. My brother never got spanked, and he made



more money than I did. But I think I've done more for people than he did.

LASKEY: Now, your brother was older?

MAY: Younger. My brother was born ten years later than I was. He's ten years younger. His name is Henry May, Henry C. May. He has been very successful. He ran an advertising business just after the war. [I have] a good story about my brother [to show what] he was always like-- Dad always wanted to buy things at discount because he was the purchasing agent for the gas company, and so everything he bought was at discount in big quantities. So Dad got in the habit of being a bargainer. He always got a bargain. And Hank became that way, and I guess I tried to. But being in the building business, you learn to pay a fair price and get a good product. Not necessarily is the good bargain the right one. But Hank would always make a fast buck; so one day, this was quite a bit later, I was building a house for a retired commander in the navy, Commander E. Knauss, and it was in one of the main streets overlooking the country club in Coronado. Hank was working for me as a flunkie, he would sweep the house out and do odd jobs. He was going to school. I was out of school by this time, and I was building houses.

So, anyhow, Commander Knauss said, "Young fellow like you, what do you do with your nighttime?"



And Hank said, "Nothing."

He said, "Well, you ought to do something with your nighttime, too." He said, "Why don't you join the naval reserve?" He said, "They pay you money to go and march. You don't do anything but march."

And so Hank thought that was terrific, and he joined up and became a naval reservist and went every three nights. Before we knew it, we were in World War II. Hank gets a telegram, and it says, "Please report for duty. Lieutenant H. C. May." He went in as lieutenant.

No, no. He threw it away. He said that it didn't apply to him. So he ignored it.

And one day, the FBI came out and said, "Young man, where's your father?" or something. So I called Commander Knauss, and he, knowing the right people, kept him from going to the brig, I guess. So Hank reported the next day. [laughter] He knew it was serious. Anyway, he went out to defend his country and became, I think, a full lieutenant in charge of a minesweeper out in the Pacific. It swept mines. He had some wonderful experiences, but that's enough of Hank.

Oh, Hank-- Henry came back from the war and had the idea to go into business for himself, so he opened up an advertising [firm], May Advertising. Knowing what he did from his previous employer, the Pacific Outdoor





[Advertising], why, he made it a fine business and built it on up and sold out very young and retired to Fallbrook where he has a big ranch now and raises avocados.

LASKEY: Oh, how nice. Any sisters?

MAY: No sisters.

Then, my grandmother was quite a woman. Whenever she used to come, she would bring me something, very generous, and she'd bring a box of candy, or a box of this or a sweater or a toy. She'd come out once a week and take the streetcar and let us know. We always knew what streetcar. It'd be the ten o'clock streetcar or the eleven o'clock one. I'd usually rush up to meet her. So, anyhow, I guess she told my folks that every time she'd get off the streetcar I said, "What did you bring me? What'd you bring me?" [laughter]

So anyhow it turned out to be that finally my folks said that you must never do that again. Dad said no more "what did your grandmother bring you." Absolutely not. The next time she came off the streetcar I said, "Dear Grandma, I hope you didn't bring me anything." [laughter] Working both sides of the family, I guess.

Anyhow, from there we go back to where we lived. The house was a great house, for those days, a great neighborhood. We grew up with a lot of fine people. Dad, being an old-timer, knew all the other old-timers. There were just



a bunch of them down there. It was a small town, and mostly everybody knew each other. And there were three or four, I think, five or six people who ran San Diego in those days, besides Mr. [John D.] Spreckels. Spreckels ran it because he owned everything. He owned the streetcars. He owned the Hotel [del] Coronado. He owned the Spreckels Theatre. He owned everything.

LASKEY: He owned the Coronado? the del Coronado?

MAY: The Hotel del Coronado. Yes, they owned that. It was called the Spreckels Corporation, and, of course, they had the sugar income. So they were very wealthy.

Besides that, there were some other very wonderful men. Mr. George W. Marston was the head of the big department store there--George W. Marston, one of the finest men. He was the one who was most responsible for the San Diego Balboa Park. I think he was a founder of the zoo, although the Wegerforths were also working with the other families I've mentioned.

Mr. Marston was responsible so much for the community of San Diego. He was on every committee. And he owned this great store. He befriended me, when I first got into business. He knew my family. Miss Mary Marston, his sister, was never married. Mary Marston was most active in civic duties and everything important to San Diego. And then he had a son, Arthur Marston, who inherited his



business and who was also very well known in San Diego. Mr. George Marston did many, many things to help me get started.

Then, another important citizen was Mr. Ed Fletcher. Mr. Fletcher had five sons and one daughter. One of the older boys was one of my good friends, Stephen Fletcher, and the younger brother was one of my brother's best friends. The Fletcher boys were of all ages; I mean they went right from [grown-up] men right down to little boys; there was a long spread between them. [laughter] So we fitted in with two of them.

Then, Mr. Roscoe Hazard was one of the great persons of San Diego. He was one of the big contractors. He was a great friend of mine, as was Mr. Fletcher. I have in my scrapbook a letter from Mr. Fletcher writing a recommendation for me to build a house for somebody: He was a fine person for helping young men to get started. But it's amazing in those days how the older men befriended younger people and helped them. I try to do that with my people. I help people all I can, young fellows that come in to my office. Youngsters ask questions and seek advice, and I try to help. I go out of my way to write letters to people and anything I can to help them along if I can.

One of the other families that was very influential in San Diego there was Mr. O. W. Cotton. He was one of the



important real estate men and one of the old-timers. A lot of the people came in and went, like the Mills' came in and made a lot of money and moved out. But Cotton was raised there and generations of his boys, two boys, Bill Cotton and John Cotton. Bill was my best friend of the Cottons, and Bill was younger. But John was the talent in their family, and he inherited all the business. Bill was the kind that went along and became a great guy. I think if you looked back you'd say that maybe that the younger took to the business better than the older. Mr. Cotton used to write articles in the newspaper, and he wrote a number of articles about me. In fact, he wrote a book and included me in the book. The Good Old Days was the name of the book. I'm included in one chapter, about the work I did in getting started in San Diego. He helped me very much, as did Mr. Fletcher and as did Marston.

Mr. Marston went so far as to give me a lot in his subdivision. He called me in one day and said that he admired my houses and he had some land up in Presidio Park, which was the best subdivision of its time, up overlooking Old Town, where later the Marston museum, the one with the San Diego Historical Society, is located.

"Pick out any lot you want, and it's yours, provided you build a house on it. I don't expect you to pay for





it," he said, "but, I'd rather have them say 'there she goes' than 'there she lays.' We need activity."

So I built my third house for sale, and it brought a lot of activity. In the meantime, the man who bought the lot decided that he'd like to get into business with me, so he bought five lots from Mr. Marston. We built five houses beside that house. Then when the banks were closed in '32, the man who was sent out from Washington to open the bank-- Our big bank shut down. The man who came out was Mr. Alex Highland. Nobody knew who he was, but he just came out and went to work at the bank. And then they, the government, opened the bank; he was sitting up there running it. And he picked out the best lot in Presidio Hills, right on the corner as you enter, and I built a beautiful one- and two-story house for them. It was the catch of the season for the builder and architect, because Mr. Highland later became quite important in San Diego. The building cost \$101,500 in 1932-33.

LASKEY: Now, this was to come later?

MAY: Yes this was-- I jumped from Mr. Marston when I was a kid growing up to what he did for me after I started to build houses.

LASKEY: I want to see if I have this straight. This was the father of one of your friends?



MAY: Mr. Marston had [a son] Arthur Marston, but Arthur Marston was much older than I was.

LASKEY: I see.

MAY: And Arthur Marston's son had [his own son] Arthur Marston [Jr.]. We were friendly, but we weren't buddies. They lived in the high-rise and I lived in the middle-rise district. We just had different circles. I think Arthur went to a school in the East, and I went to San Diego State. But we did lots of things. But the Cottons, we went to school with the Cottons, and we were fraternity brothers.

LASKEY: It was the Cottons that I got mixed up--

MAY: Then the Fletchers, we were very close because they were neighbors of ours. I would walk by their house to get to school, and so we were very friendly with them.

Then, Roscoe Hazard, I knew young Hazard. He was one of my good friends. In fact I gave Roscoe Hazard, Jr., his first job as a contractor, for which his father thanked me every time I saw him. Well, I am jumping again up to my building era. This is all my childhood era.

And then there was Mr. Frank Forward, who was president of the-- No, Mr. John Forward, yes, it was John Forward, and Mr. Frank Forward was his brother. John Forward was the founder of the San Diego Title Company. The San Diego Title Company was one of the biggest



institutions because it insured titles of all the houses in San Diego, and there was only one title company. And John Forward's house backed into our house, so I could jump from our roof onto their roof. They used to have wonderful places to hide, up on their roof. [tape recorder turned off]

I think of an episode with Mr. Forward. He had a daughter, who was not attractive, but a lively girl. Her name was Flora, Flora Forward. We were the same age. One day Mr. Forward sent word to me, I don't remember how. But he asked me to come down and see him in his office. So I went downtown. Flora, in the meantime, was going to the Bishop's School, the private school across a couple of canyons from where we both lived. I went down to Mr. Forward's office and was ushered into this big office. I must have been in my early teens, or maybe twelve, maybe eleven. Mr. Forward had me sit down. It was the first time I'd been in an office that big. He told me what a nice girl Flora was, and I said I knew she was. He said that he liked very much the way we played together and that Flora didn't know how to play tennis, and that they had a beautiful private tennis court at the Bishop's School and that if I would teach her how to play--I played tennis well--if I would teach her how to play tennis, he would be very happy



to buy me a brand-new tennis racket. So I said that that would be fine. I'd love to help Flora.

I don't think I ever got the tennis racket, but I'll tell you why. Anyhow, I had an old tennis racket.

So we went to play the first game. We got over there, and they opened the gate for us for the afternoon, the Bishop's School, and we could use their tennis court. There was another girl there that I knew, and so she came in to watch. So I gave Flora her lesson, and we batted the ball a few times. And the other girl said she'd like to play. So I said I'll give you lessons, and I got the other girl to play. We played and we played and we played. Pretty soon, Flora wanted to go home, so I took her home. Anyway, the next day, why, Mr. Forward sent word he was not buying me a tennis racket because Flora didn't like the way I taught her how to play tennis. But, actually, it was the fact that I played with the other girl and hadn't spent my time with Flora. So I learned early that you can't be a gigolo and get away with it. [laughter]

LASKEY: You mentioned the Bishop's School. That's an Irving Gill building, isn't it?

MAY: The Bishop's School you're thinking of came much later in La Jolla. This was the Bishop's School either when it was first starting or it had not arrived at La Jolla. This was back in 1916 or '17.





LASKEY: Oh, I see.

MAY: Incidentally, Gill did do the Bishop's School, and Mr. Styris also did the work on it. Then he did the E. W. Scripps Building, [named after] Ellen Scripps. She donated the school. I think the Scripps Building came first.

LASKEY: Did your association with Mr. Styris and Mr. Gill-- It almost sounds like that is where your future profession came from.

MAY: Not really, I never really thought of it. I think things brushed off on me, and I was just aware of certain things. But a lot of things I wasn't aware of until I looked back. I look back on the Gill house that we used to play in, the Churchill house, I look back on that as just being rather conventional. It was not a breakthrough like a Frank Lloyd Wright would have been at that time.

LASKEY: I was thinking more specifically of Mr. Styris.

MAY: No. He gave the boys their instructions. He was very gruff, very. No words at all. And he didn't speak to me hardly ever. I was scared to death of him. All I got was through the boys. I used tools--Dad always got me tools--but I never ever thought of ever building houses. Never. Even when I was in college it never occurred to me.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: No. No need to. Jumping again from where we were to in college, I went to school in 1929. Oh! I had an



orchestra, and as I told you earlier, I played on the radio, which incidentally made me eligible for joining a wonderful club I belong to now called the PPB. It's called the Pioneer Pacific Broadcasters. You can become a member only if you were in old radio and can prove it. Its members are announcers and all the old-time radio performers: Gene Autry, the Mills Brothers, Art Linkletter, Bing Crosby, etc.

LASKEY: It sounds wonderful.

MAY: Yes, it's wonderful. I go every six weeks. They have meetings, and I go and have a wonderful afternoon.

LASKEY: Well, when did your music career start?

MAY: It started when I was just a little boy. The first money my aunt gave me was five dollars, and I bought a bugle with it. That's all I could buy for five dollars was a bugle. So I was a bugle boy for the Boy Scouts, but I couldn't play it. [laughter] I did learn to play it. Dad had me take lessons, because Dad used to play the violin. He had me go to one of his friends, a Mr. Shaw. So I learned; Mr. Shaw taught me bugle calls.

Anyhow, they had a big parade in San Diego before I learned to play the bugle, and so I marched with my bugle out at the side of all the other fellows. They were all in the squad, but I was out marching right behind them and to the side of the scout leader. They marched up Broadway,



and I was right next to the crowd. Every time I'd go by, they'd say, "Blow the horn, bugler! Blow the horn!" And I couldn't blow, and I'd march on. [laughter]

But, then I wanted to get a saxophone. I went back and took lessons with the same man. But Mr. Shaw would call my dad and said, "C.C."--Dad's name was C.C. for Charles Clifford--"C.C., I can't keep taking him. Clifford won't practice."

But I eventually did practice and got to where I could play the saxophone. Dad kept after me. That's one of the things I thank him for. He always said, "I wish you would play the piano, son. If you carry a violin you have to tune it. If you carry a saxophone you got a big case and have to carry it. You feel sorry for the poor bass man, but the piano player he walks around with his hands empty and helps the other fellows. And there's always a piano wherever you go." He said, "A lot of times you will be out and you won't have an instrument to play." So Dad always had good advice for me.

Anyway, I played the saxophone for many years. I worked up to where we played for the Hotel del Coronado. We had remote broadcasts from there, and we had remote broadcasts from where I played the El Cortez Hotel. We followed Harry Owens, who was a great [performer] from Hawaii. Remember "Sweet Lailani"? [That was] one of the



songs he wrote. We followed him into the El Cortez. He is a great friend of mine. We are personal friends. We played piano together and did a lot of things. We had a lot of mutual friends.

LASKEY: You did learn to play the piano?

MAY: Eventually. How I learned to play the piano was, I went up pretty fast with the music. And all during the Depression--'29--they didn't have enough money to eat. They didn't have enough money to do anything. But they could buy home-brew, and they could dance. Dance orchestras were in demand. We played every Friday and Saturday night for dances. I was at the point there of making as much money as my dad was. I would save up my money. I bought a car, a big car on time. Later, I'll tell you about it.

I was called by the hotel three or four nights a week, on special nights. I played for [Charles] Lindberg when he returned. I didn't know who he was. The master of ceremonies was Will Rogers, and I didn't know who he was. So we all went down in the basement and shot pool while they had the ceremonies. We played "Lucky Lindy" from up in the balcony, we united with the concert orchestra and with Martin Day's orchestra, a big band. So anyhow, we got called back for the program to play "Lucky Lindy" again as he left. [This was] in the grand ballroom of the Hotel del





Coronado, but when you're young you don't know what's going on sometimes. I learned more about him later on, about Lindberg and what he had done.

All I wanted to do was go to school and play music. I wrote with one of my fraternity brothers [Paul C. Johnston], Epsilon Eta, a local which later became [part of] Sigma Alpha Epsilon, a national [fraternity]. We wrote two of the school's extravaganzas. Follies, we called them Aztec Follies. I wrote the music on the second show, and Paul Johnston wrote the words. And on the first show I wrote a couple of tunes and a couple lyrics, but I didn't do all the music. On the second I did all.

I was one of two bands being considered to go to the Coconut Grove in Los Angeles for a sub for Jimmy Grier when he-- No, Jimmy Grier played with Gus Arnheim, [who] was going to go on a two-week tour with his band, and they needed a pick-up band, a band they could get hold of. My Coronado band, we were considered as a possibility of going in there, which would have been the capstone for me, but we didn't get the job. Somebody else got it. Dad used that to build up on me to see how uncertain this music [business] is. You can't count on it.

And then we had a chance to go around the world, playing on a ship. Not around the world. They played from here to Japan, all the stops on the ship. We would be the



ship's orchestra. They would pay a very small stipend, like fifty dollars for the trip, but everything was free and you'd get to see the world. You'd be off all day; you'd just play the evening. It went up to the point where I bought sheet music for "Roses of Picardy." We would've played all this concert music during dinner and then dancing. I didn't know anything about concert music, so we were practicing it.

Then one day a promoter came along who knew we played at the Coronado Country Club some of the time. One day he came, and he said that we had a chance to go on the Pantages vanderbilt circuit. It would be a hundred a week for each one of us. Maybe it wasn't that much, but it was a lot, though. We had a five-piece band.

We started rehearsing like crazy. We were all set to go. We had to play a tryout to show what we could do. This man was the manager of the Coronado Country Club, and he was a former actor from New York. So we rehearsed, rehearsed, and finally we went on the stage. Mr. Pantages --Alexander Pantages--was sitting out front with two or three fellows. So they rang the curtain up and away we went. We played our act, and they said, "Thank you very much." That was the last we heard from them. [laughter]

In the meantime, I'd canceled going on the ship at the last minute, which was terrible to have done. They had to



get another orchestra at the last minute. But I was so sure that we were going from this promoter. I learned early that you can't work both sides of the street and you can't pull out on people like that. It was very bad.

LASKEY: So you lost your trip to the Orient?

MAY: Lost my trip to the Orient.

So, Dad kept building on this. "See, son, the Coconut Grove, the Orient trip, and now this. Music will be like that the rest of your life. Now," he says, "you're going back to school."

I'd already missed registration [for college], and I think registration had closed.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MAY 12, 1982

MAY: [We were talking about] my break with music. Dad convinced me I had to go back to school. But the semester had started, and they said it was too late to get in and do any good. So he sent me up to my aunt's mountain resort called Tahquitz Lodge. It is no longer in existence, but it was up in a little area called Keen Camp. It was up near Idyllwild. They were competitors at that time. Idyllwild has since gone way past them, and they are out of business. But it was a lovely spot. And I had never seen snow before, and I went through one winter of snow, which was just wonderful.

I worked up there. I would get tips from-- Not that I needed them or wanted them. But I laid fires in some of the little cabins, and they'd give me a dollar. It was, you know, fun to be useful and be wanted. I had never done any work like that for anybody, like waiting on people, ever, so this was my first experience. Anyhow I did that, and then I had a horse to ride in the hills. And I had nothing to do, just nothing. Wonderful food. People would come there. It was like a resort. They had an old woman that played the piano there on Saturday nights, and they danced in this big ballroom they had. They had great big fireplaces. It was a wonderful spot. And like I told you





earlier, all the relatives took in all the relatives, and I was just taken [in] like one of the family. [tape recorder turned off]

While getting ready to return to school and finding out I was too late for that semester, I had a short course [of] piano lessons. I took ten lessons, and that was over a period of, I think I took one twice a week. I think it was over a period of five or six weeks. I took this shortcut [method]; it was called the Waterman method of piano-playing. It was swing-base rhythm playing and what is now called stride-base and fixed chords. It was a chord system which worked very fast and very good.

Anyhow, I had this behind me, and I had my music book and these ten lessons. So when I got up to the mountains, I had all this time, and there was an old piano sitting out there in the middle of the dance floor. So I started practicing on that, and I started to enjoy playing it. You go very fast with the Waterman system. I had no teacher from then on. I just had the chords and the memory of this wonderful fellow that had hands so big he could hit fourteenth almost, but he could hit tenths with his hands almost closed. I couldn't do that; my hands are smaller. But anyhow I kept working away on the swing base, and I got so I could go through all the chords and all the progressions and could play quite a little bit. I knew about ten



pieces that I could play pretty well, ten pieces by the time I went back to San Diego, going back to school.

I agreed with my dad that I should give up music and go back to school because, as he pointed out, show me a musician that's even happy, which I couldn't. I knew a lot of musician friends. And he knew. He'd been a musician, and he got out. In fact he led the orchestra at the Isis Theatre in San Diego, which was the first opera house in San Diego.

LASKEY: Your father led the orchestra?

MAY: Yes, as a young man. Not for long, I don't remember the Isis [Opera House] staying open very long. It was before my time, I guess.

The idea was that I was seriously going back to school. I wanted to get going, doing something. I registered in [San Diego] State College as a freshman, and I got the curriculum. I decided I didn't want to study all the requirements that they had for basic things. How I did it, I don't know--good talking or luck or something. I was able to talk them into [letting me enroll in] courses in money and in banking and economics, all junior/senior subjects [that] looked really interesting in my freshman and sophomore years. So the first year I took all these business courses, and the basic business courses were all the tough ones. I was in with a lot of older folks because



I was also, you see, a year behind. A lot of my friends were up there.

Incidentally, in school the first opening day in Money, Banking and Investments, the teacher said, "I'm going to give you your first assignment. The first assignment, I'm going to give you all \$1,000." (Multiply that times twenty, that would be \$20,000.) "That's going to be your stake to start out with. I want you to invest in the stock market."

Everybody was in the stock market. He was. Everybody. We used to ditch college to go down and watch the stock market returns.

LASKEY: What year was this?

MAY: This was 1929. I registered in September.

Anyhow, I still had the orchestra of mine. Oh, I didn't give up music, but I gave it up professionally. We played Saturday nights. When I got back from the mountains, I had a whole summer before school, and I got the band back together and we started playing for dances.

LASKEY: How large was your band?

MAY: Well, it would depend on how much money you had. If you were playing for a big school and you wanted a five- or six-piece band, we had one. We played as much as eight. We got a little combo going out to a La Jolla home party



one day; we had three of us. And we played in the house for a small dance.

LASKEY: That's nice.

MAY: But we normally had never less than five, sometimes six. I would give a flat price. Then I would get my musicians as cheap as I could, and then I would keep what was left over. That taught me a lot of things, how to handle people. The boys would get together and say, "You're getting all the money, you're keeping all the money." It was good experience for me, because in the building contracting business they figure if the contractor is making too much money they should charge more. So I was able to placate and to be fair and not take more than my share. But take your share. Plus your interest on your investment. Plus interest on your gasoline for driving them, and interest on getting the job, which would be the booking fee. You're entitled to all those, and then split what's left. But don't work for the same price they do and then do all the work.

So you learned all those things, like "What makes Sammy run" again. In my book, he was out working while the other kids were going to school and then playing. And when they finished school, well, they all went to work for him.

LASKEY: Did any of these things come from your father, too?





MAY: Oh yes, he helped me. And some of this stuff you're just kind of born with. I wasn't born with enough of it. I mean I've been a "good guy" too long. I've come in last lots of times. [laughter]

But, anyhow, back to school. The class was supposed to make their investments. I didn't make my investments for two months, and, in October, the market crashed. In the first crash-- It really crashed twice, you know.

LASKEY: No.

MAY: Oh, it crashed twice. And that's where everybody got wiped out. The first crash not everybody was taken. The big financiers of the country, not the Rothschilds, they were in Europe, but the Rockefellers and-- I can't remember the names of all of them. I can recognize them, but all the big investment houses now, those names, were the men who got together and said, "We've got to stop this." They all jumped into the market and bought. And when they bought heavily, then the market started back up again. They said, "You see, there was just nothing to it."

And then everybody jumped in on the rise. My [future] father-in-law took everything he had and mortgaged it--real estate, loans. Everybody put loans on everything they owned. They took savings out of their bank. They just went crazy, and they bought. They all bought on margin. Ten percent down. And then wham! she started-- And you



couldn't stop it. The banks called their loans, and they took their houses. And took their businesses. There were people in New York jumping out the windows. That's true.

And yet in our family we were lucky that Dad had a fine job with the San Diego gas and electric company, and salaries didn't go down. Prices started falling, and they kept falling, but Dad's salary stayed the same. And, then with a yearly increase, he was doing real well. And I was doing real well; I was playing all for cash. And there was no income taxes in those days; one didn't even know about it.

So anyhow, I made my investment after the crash. And, of course, the teacher said that was not fair. "I didn't know it was going to crash," [he said].

And I said, "Well, I admit it, but you said invest it, and so I invested it when I thought was the proper time. I got more than the rest of the class did."

"Well, you are not going to get an A, that's for sure." [laughter]

LASKEY: That's not fair.

MAY: So, anyhow that was my money and banking [class] I took. Two years later, I got to the point where I couldn't go on anyhow, because I had elected junior and senior subjects and not enough basic credits. By that time I was anxious to get out on my own.



The Depression was on, and the best job you could get as a college graduate out of San Diego State was to become a salesman dispensing gasoline, a gas attendant for \$100 a month. That's what Standard Oil paid in 1930-31. Many graduates aspired to that, and everything from that was down to-- Carpenters were getting fifty cents an hour, and they worked nine hours and got paid for eight. So you got \$4 for nine hours. In those days, we never knew there was such a thing as not working Saturdays. We worked six days. And that was the highest pay the best carpenters could earn. That was high pay.

LASKEY: Were you doing carpentry work?

MAY: No, I was getting ready to. But that's what was going at that time. By '32 it got down to that. I'm talking about 1930-31.

LASKEY: Yes.

MAY: But in the meantime, I was starting to go into the dance band business again. I had gone to college in '29 and '30, and had played in the band for school dances. And then '31, I was out of school. I finished because after two years I was through and didn't want to go back and take all the freshman subjects to graduate.

LASKEY: Had you decided at this point what you wanted to do?

MAY: No. No.



LASKEY: You hadn't.

MAY: With my band's popularity increasing, I had quite an income. I had a good income. I could keep on playing professionally, you know, and still say I'm not a professional.

But I got the desire to build furniture. I don't know why, but I had this talent of carpentry that I'd learned through my Styris friends. I drew it up myself. I hope I can find the drawings someday; I've got drawings of the furniture I made. But it was made out of wood four-by-four's and one-by-four's. It was like the Monterey furniture with the rope seats and just drop the upholstery in them and iron bars bent at angles to hold up the wings of the arms. And I made quite a bit of furniture with no place to store it. Then, I put it in a house of a friend, a realtor, who had a lot of houses for sale. He couldn't sell them, because of the great '29 crash and depression. So I put the furniture in a house to store it. Painted it, did my own painting, and had someone help me decorate it and then antiqued it.

Then the house sold. So he said, "That's all right; I'll let you put it in another house." We moved it to another house, and pretty soon that house sold. So he said, "Well, why don't you go and build a house yourself?"

I said, "That'll be great."





So he introduced me to R. C. Lichty, who had a lot of lots he couldn't sell. Again because of the Depression. Now this was '30 and '31. So Lichty said, "Great, I'll put up the land. I'll put up the money. You build the house, pay me for the land, and we'll split fifty-fifty." And he had his money for the lot. And that was fine. My labor for use of his money.

So anyhow, we agreed and built my first house in east San Diego. It was a good house, I landscaped the property and moved my furniture in, and the furniture helped. When I look back at pictures of it, it was a good house. It got good publicity, but very few people would go through it because it was during the Depression. One day somebody would come through, and for three days nobody would be there. Again one day somebody would go through. Fairly soon somebody came through, and they said they were just in from Manila. He was a colonel, Colonel Arthur J. O'Leary, and his wife. They fell in love with it and they said, "Come over and see us tonight to discuss buying the house and furniture."

And when they left, I didn't know what to do, and I panicked. I went to a friend who was a realtor, and he said, "You take this form right here and you fill out the name here and you do this-- [laughter] You put down the price and put down 'all cash' and then you have them sign



here and you sign here. Then I'll tell you what to do next. And get a check!"

So I went to see them that night. They said they loved the house very much and they'd like to buy everything, furniture and the whole works. So I sold it for all cash, in the middle of the Depression for \$9,500, house and furniture.

LASKEY: And that was it?

MAY: It was outside money. They came from the Philippines from the army, with their savings that they had brought with them.

My partner, his name was, how do you say, unbelievable. His name was O. U. Miracle, just like it sounds, Oliver Ulysses Miracle.

LASKEY: That was his real name?

MAY: Yes. I just took a picture of his name the other day on the sidewalk. He built all the sidewalks and streets in the subdivision that we built in. That's why he owned all the land. He was a wonderful man. He gave me lots of wonderful business experience, like "keep all the money and then pay it out as they dun you for it." And "don't overpay; if somebody overpays you, let them find it. Don't you do their books for them." That was his theory. I don't believe quite in that, but [he said] "if it costs you \$100 to find a mistake they made, then deduct the \$100



and then give the balance back to them. But don't spend your money what's already been earned." You can take that any way you want, but that was his credo. I've changed that a lot. A lot of things you change after you get into business.

LASKEY: Yes. Well, times have changed considerably too.

MAY: That's right. But right now I have had a series of secretaries, and each one of the three of them, I think, sent out more checks than they should have to the same place. The checks were returned from the computer people. [And] big companies are so eager to have a credit on your books, like the gas company says you have credit on your books and the power company says you have credit on the books. Some of the doctors mailed them back, but I wonder how many didn't get back. We have no way of knowing, but a lot of them came back. Too many-- They were just writing checks; every time a secretary came in, they'd write the check, and, when the invoice came in, why, they'd pay the invoice again. But that is way off the subject, except character building. I mean, you know, you learn from other people.

But Mr. Miracle was real tight with money, and that's why he survived and was able to build houses and finance them when everyone else was going broke.

LASKEY: What did the house look like?



MAY: Well, it was pretty handsome. It had a cornice molding all around the eaves, a hand-tiled roof and hand-tiled floors all the way through, and Mexican fireplaces. It's been pretty well publicized. I'll show it to you someday. And for a first house, I think it has stood up well architecturally. It was much copied. I built the house, and you go back now in that one neighborhood and I counted-- I took photographs of fifteen houses that were copied from it later after I'd moved to Los Angeles in 1936.

I started building the first house in '31 and finished in '32. Then [numbers] two and three. The third house I told you about. And then we started-- We did an awful lot of houses in San Diego; it's hard to believe. Dr. David Gebhard [from] the University of California at Santa Barbara is interested in me and the work historically and architecturally. He's been collecting, cataloging my houses. I am collecting all of the old photographs for him to examine. Now, why I started this I don't remember why--

LASKEY: I asked you about the style of the house.

MAY: Yes. So he wanted me to list all the houses we had built and asked, "How many did you build?" And I tried to guess and decided to make a list, which is now in process.

[tape recorder turned off]





## SECOND PART

JUNE 9, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. May, almost from the beginning your houses were unique, and they were the early California style. How did you develop your style?

MAY: It's sort of difficult to say how I developed the style, because I was unconscious of anything in those days. And you said one of the first-- But actually the first house was unique. I built it sort of as rebelling against the kind of houses in the community and against the box house, which I said some of the [Irving] Gill houses were. They had that great detail and the arches that said "Gill," but the living was still living in a box. To me, when we lived on the ranch, with cross-ventilation and rooms spread out and around courtyards, basic old California plan, it seemed to be a much better way to build and live.

I think it can be easily said that the floor plan determines the look of a building. If you build it square, absolutely square, why, you're going to get a square building. And if you build a rectangle, you'll have a rectangular building. If you build an L, you'll have an L-shaped building and more chance to work with it. If you've got a U, you'll have a little more chance, because you've got three facades to tie together. Every time you build a wing you are starting to enclose space, after you build the



second wing. The second wing, third wing, fourth wing enclose space, if they are properly placed around the courtyard. And that, of course, is the basis for the thesis [that] the whole California way of living is for protection and for trapping the sun and for having privacy. All the things that we think about in fine housing today are what the early Californians did, and what I originally did and still do.

People coming from back East are usually so steeped in the ways of the East Coast [that] they come out and look at something like this, and they'll think it over and then they'll go buy the house that they are used to. It gets back to the same thing that I've said over and over again, that people can't judge any better than they know. If they only know buildings the way they were raised up as children, why, they're looking to find something [like that]; it's like going home. And a house being the single biggest investment that the usual family makes in a whole lifetime, why, they want to be pretty careful and be sure that what they're doing is the right thing.

The strange thing in my first houses [was] all the people I sold to were all people who had traveled around the world. Like the first house I built for Mr. Miracle on Norma Drive was bought by Colonel and Mrs. O'Leary. He had been in the army, and they had traveled all over the world.



They were world travelers, and when they saw this, they said that's the way they wanted to live. And I think that people that have the advantage of travel are more educated about living, having seen people from Eskimo houses to skin houses of the Africans and the wonderful Mediterranean houses and the houses up in Oslo and Norway, Cape Cod and Colonial, and you name it.

Remember how the first settlers brought their ideas over from the old country. On the Mayflower, they weren't from Spain. They were from England someplace, and they brought their idea of living [from England]. Of course, they had to adapt it to the climate. So the climate really dictates; you can see that all over the world. I mean, the warm climates with their courtyards and patios, and only in the last, oh, the last couple of generations have we been even able to think about putting a courtyard type of house in the East. Now they are becoming very common. Mainly it is because of the insulation development and then being able to move heat great distances. Where in the old days you had to use a fireplace, now we have forced air, and even better yet we've hot water for steam radiators or for radiant heating, that would be a coil fan unit where they put hot water through a coil and a fan blows air over it. So there's three phases of hot water heating that can be used with this type of living. And then with double-



glazing and insulation, the houses are more adaptable to cold climates. Modern mechanics and modern building materials have made it easier to adapt this type of house for sites in the Northwest and the East. And we've done many, many houses across the country.

But, going back to the style, I remember Mr. Wright--Frank Lloyd Wright--told me, he said that you "find that designers are born; they are not made. We can't teach anybody how to be a designer, try though we may."

I often relate my building to an orchestra. You have one man in the band who's a good arranger, and he can arrange the tunes. So he's the arranger; he arranges and makes them sound better than anybody else can. He knows how to voice the instruments. He knows how to take a lead, how to back up, how to play obligatos or counter melodies, counter themes. And how the strings on top of a low-voiced alto saxophone and a lower-voiced tenor sax would work. In fact, he knows that if the band went to three saxophones and added a soprano sax that it will take the lead note over everything else. He knows that. He's [the] designer of the music for the band, the arranger. There's usually only one in every band. Not everybody can do it. Often several people can, but there's always one best one, and he's the arranger. And he's the one that makes the band great. Benny Goodman was a great band leader, but if you





took the arranger-- And that was a wonderful musician called Fletcher Henderson. Fletcher Henderson did all of Benny Goodman's arranging. Without Fletcher Henderson you may never have heard of Benny Goodman.

And so it goes the same way [with] architecture. There's one man who knows, and that's the designer. The architect has got his name out front, and the architect takes all the credit. But in his office someplace--unless he's the designer himself--he'll have a designer just like the orchestra leader has an arranger. So, getting back to your question, I just built the house the way I thought it ought to be built. Design came naturally.

LASKEY: I was just wondering, where did you get the experience to build a house? We've talked a lot about your background, but specifically how did you know how to design a house when you first had this opportunity.

MAY: Well, it was real simple; there wasn't too much to it. I'll tell you two or three reasons why it was simple. The first house, I think I told you, I built largely myself with Mr. William F. Hale, who was my mentor in construction. He taught me all the things he knew. We built the whole house from foundations, all the way through. We did everything. I worked in every trade with him coaching me. We got experts only in one or two trades when we needed them, such as a plumber and an electrician.



LASKEY: So you were essentially apprenticed to Mr. Hale?

MAY: Apprenticed, yes, on this first house.

But prior to that I had drawn the plan for it. And I had drawn the plan by just drawing naturally, not well, just enough to get my ideas on paper. Just last weekend I went through some old drawings and found one of our first houses. And it helps me to answer your question, because in those days when we built a house it would be a \$10,000 house, which now would be a \$200,000 house, and I had two sheets of paper. One was a foundation plan outlined over the floor plan, so those two plans were one plan. And one was a little plot plan and one elevation, or maybe one or two principal elevations of the house.

We went out to get the bulding permit, and I remember Oscar Knecht was the chief building inspector of San Diego. I came in with my drawing, not the first one, but one of the later ones, and there were only two pages to look over. There wasn't big building in San Diego in the thirties. He looked it over, and he said, "This looks pretty good. Do you know how to build it?"

I said, "I can build it."

And he said, "OK."

And stamp, stamp, and it was all done.

But, nowadays it's another world. You can't get started, a man can't prepare the raw lot for less than nine



months to a year, to get the lot ready to build on. Fees and commissions, soils engineers, geologists, calculations, test, reports, etc., etc., you've got every kind of engineer working on that land before we can get the building permit. We have to have special soils reports, and geology the same

With that all approved by several departments, then we start planning. Then you take topog[raphical] maps and measure all the trees, and already you've spent four times more than finished houses used to cost and you spend that much on services. That's not all. Then you go down to the building department, and they'll take the plan-- Los Angeles County is strict and they'll take your plan and keep it maybe for five weeks. If they don't like you, why, maybe six, seven weeks.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: If you have a friend, they'll take it a lot faster. I guess that's the normal practice. I'm not complaining about that, that's life. They check for everything. I mean, their engineer will sign the drawings that the structure is sound, and they'll check all these drawings and ask for more drawings to make it clear certain things are there. And it's their job to make sure it's well built. But the point is now some of these houses are being overbuilt that you can't believe it. Way back in the



old days we used to say that a two-by-four vertical stud would carry ten times any weight you could put on it, and, recently, just three or four years ago, they have cut the studs down now from three-and-three-quarter inches by an inch-and-three-quarters down to an inch-and-a-half by three-and-a-half. Because they figured that they were shipping all this extra wood they didn't need in studs and they were wasting lumber.

Anyhow, in building a house we have many things now that make it cost more. You didn't ask me that question, but you asked me how--

LASKEY: But, I do want to know about that. Yes.

MAY: The main thing is this: that we just have too many people to do the job. In the old days, I was the apprentice. I drew my own plan and built it. I was the contractor, and I was the so-called building designer or the architect.

But I wasn't an architect. At that time they allowed me to practice architecture if I notified the client in writing that I was not an architect. Then, I had all the rights of an architect. That's the way I operated for many years before the building designer license law was enacted. Because, then, I went in under the grandfather clause.

But the number of people we have [now]--[tape interrupted] three or four engineers, which would include the





soils engineer, and then we have the subcontractors. The subcontractor many times now is a big company who owns a firm, and they'll have a superintendent who'll run all of their jobs. The superintendent will have a foreman on each of his jobs, each one drawing money or a percentage. And then they'll have the men who will do the actual construction work.

Our big problem right now is communication. We were building a fine big home in Rancho Santa Fe this last year. And the contractor brought up all his subcontractors to see the work they were going to have to do, to see my house because they hadn't done that kind of a house. But who came? The mason who was going to build it didn't come. The boss, or owner of the subcontracting business, came for the ride to Los Angeles. So, I found I was talking to the heads of all these small companies. So, they said, "Oh, yes. We can do it. Sure, sure. Don't worry, our men can do it."

And so I got down there, and everything was being done wrong. I said to the general contractor, "What happened?"

And he said, "Well, they're doing like you said."

"But these aren't the men I talked to. They are not doing it at all right."

So I got out with the trowel, as I usually do, and I started to show how to do it.



Then the workman says, "So that's what you want. Well, they never told me that."

This happened with most of the subs. So it was lack of communication, and pride in their work.

We furnish a detailed set of specifications. In the old days it would be written on the plan, two or three sheets, four sheets, five sheets. As times got a little better and houses larger, we'd furnish more drawings. Also you must realize that I had the advantage of being the builder, so I didn't have to write down all the things that I would have to write for another builder. I would just give the subs instructions directly. So I was able to have them do it my way easily.

The way I would work with a client [was] they probably would have seen a house already built, and they'd say, "I'd like to build one like it, or bigger or similar or cheaper." I didn't usually do anything cheaper per square foot, because prices kept rising. From '32, they slowly rose from \$2.50 per square foot to now over \$100. So every time you built a house it was going to cost a little more than the one you just finished. We had no problem of being built any cheaper until the "Low Cost House" by Chris Choate and me, which is another story.

The house was shown. The client said he liked it, so I would make a real rough floor plan for him. If he had a



lot-- If he didn't have a lot I wouldn't bother-- If he had a lot, he was a good prospect and I would make a plan. And then I would make a proposal that I would design and build the house according to their approved plan. And it would use the same specifications in the house that they saw at 4724 Norma Drive, for instance. They'd have seen the house, had walked through it; so they knew it was plaster, it had a tile roof, they knew it was going to be tile floors, and use landscaping up to a certain point. So they would sign the contract, and away we'd go.

In fact, I built three houses in Coronado that the owners never saw until the houses were completed. They [the buyers] were in the navy. One was Lieutenant Commander Mort Seligman, and one was a commander, Matt Gardner. They came through different times at Coronado, and they said, "I'm going to be here as long as it takes you to get the house designed"--which would be a couple of weeks--"I'll leave the money with the bank, and they'll pay you out as you need it." Neither communicated or saw their house until it was all finished.

So being the whole one-man band, you can control it, you see. You can make more music with less overhead cost than you can with the present day where you have all these various subs, building departments, state and federal



regulations, unions, and on and on. The costs are so very high.

Let me take a specific example as of right now. This happened just last year, 1981, at the end of the year. We were finishing up a large home in Rancho Santa Fe. The contractor wanted some information about locating an outlet which apparently had been located in the wrong position. So I went down to the job, among other things to see. I am using this outlet as a specific example. It was an electrical outlet where you put your cord plug, it was not located to plan.

The owner said, "Well, as long as it's not exactly where it was supposed to be, I don't mind paying for it. Let's move it where you want it." I didn't think it really made any difference. Well, anyway, the owner was a perfectionist, so he said, "Let's put it where we ought to have it or we can install another one."

So we decided to move it. I said the electrician would have to move and locate the outlet according to plan at his expense. So there was to be no charge for the move, but the contractor said, "I'll have to write up a change order." So he wrote the change order. He put, "One electrical outlet, moved at owner's request." I later found out he had charged us \$50, plus overhead and profit.

LASKEY: For the outlet?





MAY: For moving the outlet. It was an electric conduit, steel conduit. The [sub]contractor then added on 15 percent overhead and then 10 percent profit. So that amounted to \$63.

Then the contractor took that billing, and it came through to me and that's where I picked it up. I was checking the bills on the billing. And here the contractor had added his overhead at 10 percent, which is in his contract, and profit [at] 10 percent. So he took the \$63 and put ten on and ten again amounting to \$76. And then my contract calls for 15 percent of final cost, so that brought the original \$50 extra to \$114, an error which should not have been charged in the first place. So that went into the cost in the billing, so the final labor cost came out over 100 percent. So here you have two contractors charging 25 and 20 percent on every change order. [My company] charges 15 percent on top of that. Well, that's just too much, too much. It's all supervisory cost that produces no value to the house. Nothing is treated as value. So all these percentages, that's just one of the big problems. And there's lots of problems why costs keep rising.

One of the other problems are extras. The same thing happens there. These are extras but nonextras, why-- There are many ways of making more money by not building it



in quite right and that type of thing, and so you need supervision. I don't want to get into that right now. But this makes my point that it used to be so much easier to build.

One thing I did have [was] the knack to visualize how it would look when it was finished. I mean, just a little rough sketch, and I could tell. And I did a lot of self-learning. Self-teaching, I should call it. I had a friend in Del Mar, named Bill Mushet. He built a very attractive type of a ranch house that I always admired. Very simple and just good lines. He was older than I, and we were very good friends. I would see him every now and then. He had a little store up there, and I used to go and visit with him.

I remember the great houses in Los Angeles. They were published in the great old Architectural Digest, which was run by Mr. J. C. Brasfield. In those days, he ran only the fine houses, and he had wonderful taste. Nearly every architect of note has had his houses in the old original Architectural Digest. It came out four times a year, and it really covered some of the great houses. Wallace Neff and Gordon Kaufmann and Paul Williams. I could go on and on with all the great architects and their work that appeared in those years, 1925 and on. I was conscious of



those ardent architects. The Home magazine and Sunset magazine I used to take.

I didn't [borrow] whatever came before me. Mr. George Marston of San Diego told me, when I was first starting, "An architect is one who remembers." But I didn't ever do any copying. I didn't believe in that and luckily didn't have to.

One of my friends said, "You shouldn't even look at the magazines because they can influence you badly. Just stay pure and then do what you like to do good."

But I don't think that is quite right. I think the more you know, the better you can judge. If your judgment is not good, and, if you see some piece of roofing that you think is bad, or bad scale, or bad ornamentation, or unnecessary or bad use of materials, I mean, you should-- I got in the habit, as I looked at things, of just criticizing it, "This is wrong, this is wrong." I can hardly see anything now that I don't criticize. And I think rightfully so. But it's funny how you find these things.

People bring in their drawings on subdivision approval of the architecture, and I'll look at them and see things you just wouldn't believe. Fenestrations all mixed up. They don't realize fenestrations should follow the form of the house. The change of materials on an outside corner



and item after item that they don't know what they are doing. And these are fine architects.

Just the other day I picked up a paper I was going to send to one of my associates in Arizona. And there was this great big building out in-- The most horrible building I ever saw. [laughter] It was out in Chatsworth. The title in the Times was "New York Builder Comes to L.A. to Build Big Building." This big building looked like about five Cinderella houses piled on a pile, one on top of each other. It was the worst thing I ever saw in my life. This was quite a while back, and they said they were going to sell it for a million and a half dollars, which I thought was really breaking the bank in those days, because we hadn't quite hit that point in the San Fernando Valley of houses being that expensive. Here in Bel-Air and Beverly Hills, some were. But it was no problem at all to take that house apart.

If I see something that looks ridiculous, I say, "What's wrong with it?" I would see a picture with about eighteen sofa pillows on the sofa, so you can't sit down. [laughter] It was so bad. These tastes, these fads come and go, come and go.

I recall with great interest, I was working on my new book and I was going through an old book published by the AIA in 1932. That was right in the bottom of the





Depression, it might have been '33. But it was the "House of Tomorrow" by the AIA, pictures of all the houses that their members had designed, that their architects had built in the late twenties. And there are some fine famous architects in there too. They were the most sad looking group of houses you ever saw. Some were flat top with iron pipe, flat decks, and curved windows on a curved wall. And there was just an air that you knew-- I made a statement at that time--in fact I wrote it in the book--that there can't be a house of tomorrow because tomorrow never comes. And anybody who is foolish and vain enough to stick his neck out and say "this is the house of tomorrow" is God, and I don't think there is anyone that smart yet.

Now they have this postmodern thing that has "come in." That to me is just, you know, why? It depreciates the neighborhood. The next-door neighbor gets one, and [the rest of the neighbors are] sick and sad. And I've seen two or three of them out here that I believe should be burned down. They don't contribute to the community. The definition of a good house is how it fits in with its neighbors. And when you make it stand out, out of character with the community-- We have a restriction in our deeds which we put on all the lots we sold when we were subdividing, and that was no "freak houses," which covers an awful multitude of sins, because there are a bunch of



houses that, you know, aren't machines for living. The architect can say that they are, but they're not good machines.

LASKEY: Well, that's an interesting point, because when you started building in 1932, that was I think when the International style came into prominence, that was the house of tomorrow. Did you have any difficulty, as a builder, dealing with that particular style?

MAY: I didn't know about it. I was so busy building houses. I built the first house, and away I went. As I say, I was just myself. Mr. Miracle backing me and a number of my friends assisting from time to time financially. I was really unaware of the International style at all until way up in the-- Let's see, it had to be in '45. I started in '32. I didn't know what it was and could care less, I guess.

But, I do know that in '45, roughly, Elizabeth Gordon in House Beautiful magazine did a big feature article, a complete issue, on my second house in Los Angeles, page after page after page. That was built in '39, and I don't think they discovered it was as good as it was until '45. It was in '45, I think, when they ran this article; it may have been '43. I went to New York as guest of House Beautiful magazine and Miss Gordon. They had a broadcast about the house. I met many people at the press reception.



I went to the receptions and met some of the New York architects. I had a wonderful time as a guest. It was an educational experience

At that time I bought [Le] Corbusier's book. It just says "Corbusier" on it. It is a big horizontal book. I came into Miss Gordon's office one afternoon and she said, "What's that?"

I said, "I just got this."

And she said, "Throw it away! [laughter] There's nothing in it for you."

So I didn't even look at it. I thumbed through it. "Avoid it," she said.

I admired her so very much. She seemed to be able to pick the best of the best, and the friends who surrounded her were just great friends and great architects and great builders and great people on the House Beautiful staff, and the people whose houses I visited were fine people. I thought, "Gee, this is the side of road that I want to be on." So I did not pursue Corbusier.

But commenting on that, I saw the Le Corbusier book maybe about nine months ago, very deep in all my old books. I pulled it out and started looking at it, and I was amazed to see what I saw. He didn't know how to live, and then I read later on that he was doing this for war workers, for factory workers' houses. And it was a shame to make



factory workers live like he planned [for] them. I saw that when you walked in the front door, [if he is] sitting on the commode and the door was open, you could see the gentleman of the house sitting in the buff. Now that's the absolute lowest form of planning anybody can do if they have one iota of semblance of good living or breeding. I saw places where they had the toilet so far back and so many things in the front so that you couldn't get to it. I saw things you could not believe: going up an outdoor stairway to get to the bedroom, in the rain and the cold and the sleet, the way they built the houses in Europe. So I realized what Elizabeth Gordon was saying, and I'm glad that I didn't get much influence from it, or any rather.

LASKEY: What you said in an earlier part in the interview that you don't think that you were influenced by your own background and by the housing that you lived in--

MAY: Oh, I do--oh, I do. No, I was influenced by the houses I lived in--

LASKEY: At least by your heritage.

MAY: Yes. Oh, yes, that's where the influence came from. I think I said, maybe I didn't make it clear enough, was that when I decided to build the house in San Diego, why, everybody else was building tiny, little boxes \*[with the

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





garage on the back corner of the lot with a driveway wasting space that should have been used for living. They were little boxes, with a flat roof and a fringe of tile across the front.] It would be about twenty-by-twenty-two or -twenty-five [square feet], which they would divide into three or four rooms for bedroom, den, bathroom, one common bathroom, and the dining room-kitchen in the square block, and in the back of the lot would be an eighteen-by-eighteen square foot garage. And you would have a long driveway going in--the worst place in the world to put the driveway.

That's the first thing we did. In the first house that we built, we made the driveway short and put the garage out front. We made that a part of the enclosure, so the house enclosed the patio, and the patio was U-shaped.

A lot of things influenced me. I had a friend who had a big beautiful home that I used to visit, and they had these beautiful plumbing fixtures. It was done by a Los Angeles architect, Mr. Barton, who worked with his wife. He built houses in Talmadge Park. He built this house and it had this "beautiful" orchid and black tile. I say "beautiful" in quotes, it didn't look very good. It was in 1929. Shiny as it could be, just a slick shine, and big white grouts, quarter-inch white grouts between each tile. Each one was laid like it was a jewel, a masterpiece of value. And here was a washbasin standing on a great big



porcelain pedestal leg. Underneath it was a bunch of handles, hot and cold water supply, and people would hang the washrag on [them] and hang the toilet brush on [them], on the handles. And it was just a-- I thought, "Why in the world are people living like that?"

And then, if you didn't have a pedestal-- That was deluxe to get a pedestal. That was 1929-- No, it was 1930, 1931. It had a great big base that tapered up to the big, big basin. If you were real deluxe, you got a great big, big one. Then the super-super, they had two of them. [laughter] They came out much later with two basins on one big leg. It was really pretty bad. Then at the time, of course they didn't know, they had porcelain handles, and then people would twist the handles and cut their hand. They cut their hand so many times they had them changed to metal handles. That's just incidental.

So anyhow, if you didn't like the pedestal lavatory, you could go back to what they had used from the day I was born, I guess. What first came was a wall-hung lavatory. It just was bolted to the wall. And you still saw the same trim, with the hot water and cold water pipes coming out and under and going up to the bowl and drain trap. Then you had all kinds of bathroom supplies [with] nowhere to put them. I won't go into details, but they had the deluxe which used to have two handles with the water coming out of



a single spout. The cheap way was to have a hot water spout and a cold water spout, and then you mixed the water in your hands without trying to burn them. And each spout cost five dollars more. And when you built a house in those days, five dollars was five dollars, so you usually took the wall-hung lavatory with the hot water and the cold water [spouts] and a rubber plug. That was it.

But anyhow, I rebelled, and so on my first house, and I think I have been credited with--I know I should be, and [I think] I have been--in innovating the pullman lavatory. My first house, that would be in 1931 I think we have established, I couldn't get any lavatories to build in, and the big one was too big and too thick and too much metal on it to build in. So I conceived of using a kitchen sink; the kitchen sinks at that time came single, twenty-by-thirty inches and double. So I just ordered the small special twenty-by-twenty-four kitchen sinks and put them on \*[the top of a cabinet. The cabinet had two doors covering the sink, two or three stacks of drawers on each side for bath linens and towels. Medicines were in a locked drawer. And a window or a mirror was over the sink. The top and splash was tiled or with marble on which you could place your toiletries. Compared to the old wall-hung or

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



pedestal lavatory, great functional and beauty progress was made.] In those days they didn't have garbage grinders, so there were just small holes in the sinks, so there was a small hole there. Just what I wanted.

Then, it seemed so ridiculous to put handles and a spout on a flat surface, and build it like the big, big pedestal lavatory, and then try to keep the pedestal top clean with a washrag or a piece of cloth or anything to wipe and polish it up, and keep the spout and the faucet handles beside the spout on the deck clean. It was just impossible. I was always my mother's housecleaner, especially bath and kitchen. Oftentimes, she was not well, so all my growing years, my brother and I, we learned how to take care of the house and help her and work in the kitchen and cook and do things to help her. So I knew what it was to put a dish rag between all those spouts and handles, so I thought of putting a shower, no, a bathtub filler on the wall with two handles above my bathroom kitchen sink. And it would mix into a shower combination so that you had a handle for hot and a handle for cold and the spout came out of the wall and into the bowl like a fountain. You would turn on the water as much as you want and wash your hands like in a fountain. There would be fresh water all the time, instead of washing in the dirty, old water in the





bowl. Anyhow, that was my first one, \*[to my knowledge, on my first house in 1931 was the first built-in lavatory which became known as the "pullman lavatory."] From then on we never used a lavatory. Everything was built-in pullmans with kitchen sinks. And one day they caught on, a number of years later, plumbing fixture companies like American Standard offered oval porcelain bowls, and everybody does them now.

In fact, in 1940, they came out with a new mixing valve called the Moen, right after the war [started], in '42, '43. But it didn't get going very fast, but you could lift the lever and then twist the lever and you got hot or cold water. It was called the Moen valve. It made more sense because you only had one plate on the wall, and then a little knob, so you could turn it to a shower or turn it to a tub. Then they also had a Moen valve which just had one mounting on the deck with the handle coming out of the center of the spout. You turned the handle right or left or up and down for volume. And then you only had one thing to clean. So I succumbed and went into specifying using those.

I used those for a number of years until one day I thought, "What in the world happened to my old idea of it

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



being on the wall?" You still had one thing to clean, and you still had all of these problems of [something] more mechanical to care [for], these automatic valves. You always had to have them fixed. So I went back, and, for the last three or four years, we have done nothing but wall-supply water for lavatories again. And everybody loves them because you just take one wipe of the deck and it's clean.

But that's off the subject; you asked me where I got the idea. Well, I just got ideas; I would look at things and see that isn't very good. I could do a lot better. I rebelled against not using concrete slabs for subfloors, I wanted the concrete slab to keep the house low on the ground, because if you can't walk out of the living room or the bedroom or the kitchen onto the ground, if you have to go down steps, why, you're not living like a real Californian lives from the house to the patio. We never had steps down from the house to the patio. And we always built on the same level, up a few inches so water wouldn't run in, but you walked out of your room and you didn't go down steps. You can't get a tie or a continuity or a relation to the garden if you are looking down steps at it. I call it "ground contact."

So, I started studying on how to make satisfactory concrete slabs. The first one, on my first house, I worked



out was quite unique. I laid the whole-- We built the foundation, and in between the foundation we laid hollow tile with airspace in them. It was a building tile that they made in San Diego in those days; it was hard burned clay that had hollow cells from the bottom to the top--- hollow cells with solid top and bottom. So I laid those over the whole floor and then poured the concrete slab on top of that, and I had anchored in, or locked in, a dead airspace under the floor so that stopped capillary attraction. It kept the floor warm, and the air stopped moisture. It was expensive. You're putting down two floors. Because right then, you could just grout it in and have a floor all ready, except it wasn't strong enough with the hollow spaces.

LASKEY: Now, when was this? This was in the 1930s?

MAY: This was in my first house, in 1931.

LASKEY: In your first house?

MAY: Yes. And of course my method was unknown to the building code. The FHA [Federal Housing Administration] came in '32, '33, and they wouldn't allow cement floors at all. But I had built a lot of successful houses by that time, quite a few houses, with cement slabs.

LASKEY: Did you have any difficulty with your clients with the cement floors? Weren't they used to wood floors?



MAY: No, they liked them very much. \*[You see, there was the base upon which we could lay wood, linoleum, asphalt tile, carpeting, or floor tile, or any other floor, and be close to the ground.] The ones who lived around the world, they lived with tile floors. You go to Spain, you don't have many wood floors. You go to Mexico, Portugal, and mainly it's all tile. Japan has both. But the warm countries like California had lots of tile floors, but in the '20s and '30s, they were laid over wood subfloors and were too high off of the ground.

And then I found a man in Los Angeles, Mr. A. B. Rice, who was putting cement floors down quite successfully, and he was very helpful to me. I went up to see him, and he wrote me a letter and sent me a sketch of how he did it. He did it with "rock cushion" which came to be the actual way \*[to lay cement floors--over a rock cushion that has air space. He was the man--A. B. Rice who invented the idea. Mr. Rice is deep in my memory. He was a very fine man. Incidentally, this system I pioneered then was finally approved by the FHA and the VA. In one of the major swings after World War II, my plans permitted the thousands upon thousands of tract houses all over the U.S. and helped the spread of the ranch house idea--ground

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





contact--no steps from the floor to the garden and out-of-door patios. This foundation and slab plan was published in Architectural Forum, using a photograph of mine in its Book of Low Cost Houses in 1935.]



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

JUNE 9, 1982

MAY: The sketch that my friend Mr. A. B. Rice from Los Angeles sent me will show grade under the foundation walls, and then a six-inch layer of two-inch well-graded crushed rock placed on the ground, above this layer of paper then known as Sisalkraft. It was a kraft paper with sisal fibers in it, so it didn't punch through holes. It was real tough, a real tough paper. That was laid on top of the rock, and then the slab was poured on top of that, a three-and-a-half-inch slab, and screed off from form to form. So it was very simple. All this was done after the plumbing had been installed and the electrical lines and any drains put in. So, when they finished that, we were all set to screed it off and all set to start building the house. It was one simple operation.

I'll stay on the foundations for a minute now. I started using that, and my clients liked the house when they got it. If there was a question, I just showed them how it was termite proof, because it was all concrete and no wood beneath them. And there was no ventilation required. The ventilation in everybody else's houses was letting cold air in at night, and they would get cold feet, because the only thing between your feet and the outside air, the cold night air, was three-quarters-inch of



flooring. You would have a half-inch of plywood or maybe an inch-and-a-half of subflooring and a half-inch of wood flooring. So you were standing on cold wood, ice cold. I know that by this office. My feet are cold all the time. I have to have an electric heat pad under my desk in the wintertime because of crawl space framing, instead of rock/air space cement slab construction.

So on this slab you get a solid feeling, and it just feels like it is well built, and you have no termites. It is easier to heat because the temperature of the floor then becomes the mean average temperature of the area you're building in. This is a known fact.

The [response] was so good that I built a house for Mr. Tate--M. E. Tate. I think I spoke of him before. He was one of the first air controllers at Lindbergh Field. It was right at the time of Lindbergh. His house was a modest house, but the floor-- I took a picture of it, incidentally, in building it, and all it showed was a corner that had three stakes, or four stakes, in the corner and just one outside board, a header board, to hold the foundation in. It showed the excavation and it showed the rock and the paper and the area where we poured the concrete.

A short time later, Architectural Forum put out a book called [The Book of] Low Cost Houses. One of the early



pictures in the book was of the Tate house and this method of foundations, and they commented on how this was a new way to build foundations. It was so simple. At this time FHA financing had come in; VA financing had not come in. The FHA financing would not permit any kind of cement floor, absolutely none. Nor would they entertain the prospect of having them submitted to them. So it was quite a few years later before a few of the ground-breakers, or what you would call the pioneers, set the way and made them approve, and then finally FHA and VA approved the method.

I still use this method. The important key to it though is that many times people will do it and leave out the rock. Well, that is the whole key. The rock must be two-inch well-graded. For example, if the fill were all golf balls, its volume would be one-third airspace. From the dirt base to the bottom of the slab, of the six inches it would be one-third airspace spread out over six inches, so that the capillary attraction can not get through, but if you were to use mixed gravel, then the mixed gravel would fill in the voids and make it solid gravel and you would have no airspace. So it must be well-graded so that it's all the same size. Now if were a half-inch rock, it would be not as much because the pieces are smaller and would come together closer. But the bigger the pieces are, the more airspace you get when you fill provided they are





of equal size. So the two inches is the minimum size that we ever used for ease of handling.

We never had any problem with our houses anywhere, except for one time. We were building on the top of a hill for a wonderful attorney in Los Angeles, Tom Dempsey. He was a great tax attorney here. Taxes were just becoming a nuisance to people. And we built a fine house out in Northridge. It was the exact top of the hill, and everything fell in all directions from it.

We designed the house, and we were getting ready to build it when the concrete constructor said, "You know," he said, "I've been putting in foundations all my life and I know the foundation is very good"--Mr. Dempsey was there---"Mr. Dempsey, I know the foundation is good, but I can save you some money. You know when you build on the top of the hill you don't need any rock because everything slopes away, so there is no moisture."

I was young, and I bit. I said, "That sounds good."

And Mr. Dempsey, he said, "It sounds good to me, too."

So we saved a few dollars. It wasn't much in those days.

Anyhow, I found out that the wonderful Mr. Concrete Contractor wasn't so smart. Water is on top of a hill; capillary attraction will draw water right up a hill. And rain water off the roof wet the ground and the slab on



grades and warped the floor, just sucked it right in. We had vapor coming through the slab. We had a terrible time. So from that day forward I never, ever built without the rock cushion and the vapor seal. Also that was the end of free advice without testing.

LASKEY: That brings up the risky point of experimenting with materials.

MAY: I learned many lessons. One good thing: I made lots of errors, but I never made the second error twice if I could help it. I never let anybody else do it if I was connected with it. And as I said, I never again ever did that. Never did. And never would, because I knew it wouldn't work. But I made lots of mistakes but always on my own experimental homes. And, as you said, if you make mistakes you do it better the next time.

Designwise, when I built my first house, I made it a little too high in front. The whole house was about six inches too high, and, then compounded, it was up on a five-foot rise of the land. The land sloped up to the building site, on a slope, so when you looked up, you kind of looked up under it. In other words, it could have been a foot lower, and it would have looked a lot better. When you look up at a house, it should be lower. Just for general reasons--just for general appearance. And when you're looking down on it, it should be higher, otherwise it looks



like the roof is touching the ground. That's one of the things you learn in design, by doing the wrong [thing] you learn, and you should tell the difference. But a lot of people can't tell the difference.

In fact I'm starting a new file right now that's going to be a-- I'm at a point now in my practice where I can choose my clients and I turn down a house, unless there is a real reason for it. I'm preparing a test for possible clients. It will say, "Do you like this?" or "Do you like this?" They'll go through it and tell me. I've done some houses recently-- No, I have done a house recently where the client had no taste at all and knew nothing about the arts. Couldn't judge or decide anything between right, best, or wrong. And it has been a terrible drain on my time.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: Yes, but I'm conscientious and I want to make the house as good as it can be. It's a fine house in a fine neighborhood, amongst the most prestigious houses in Southern California. The house should blend in, but he is doing all kinds of things to make it bad. I fight [with him] all the time. It's just too much work. I'd rather not have the house. But I can't give up once I start. But, again, they hire you and pay you a handsome fee for



the work and then don't take your advice. It's not very smart.

LASKEY: That's a good point. Where does the client's responsibility start, and where does the designer's responsibility start, and then who's in charge here?

MAY: Well, I came to the point so a paragraph in my contract now says there will be no changes made whatsoever in design or change in any drawing without my written permission, and that includes landscape architect, the interior decorator, the owner, contractor, and any friend.

I invoke it all the time, because [I say,] "Why do that? Why not do it the right way? You've hired me to do what I do best. I'm telling you how to do it the proper way. It makes no difference to me, except I want to see a good job for you."

And they usually come around. Except one project: "No," he says, "I still like it my way." [laughter]

LASKEY: It must be hard on you.

MAY: It is. It takes a lot out of me.

LASKEY: I noticed in your very early designs you did them in Spanish, you had the rooms written in Spanish--

MAY: Yes.

LASKEY: Any reason for that?

MAY: Just youth. Youth is my way. I would have a fireplace in every room and no heat. [laughter]





LASKEY: How did you happen to come to Los Angeles?

MAY: That's a very interesting story. I had built my third house for sale in Los Angeles, and I was doing good business by that time. I was just as busy as I could be building houses all over down there. I think we figured that in five years we built fifty houses. That would be ten houses a year, which is almost impossible. I think it was a few more years than that. My memory may be not quite right, but it was a lot of houses. We're cataloging them now.

But the third house I built for sale; it was the one that Mr. George Marston, as I said earlier, gave me as a gift, a lot to get his Presidio Hills subdivision started. He sold and I built four or five houses in the subdivision as a result of his generosity. Anyhow, the house was open for inspection. I told you about Admiral [Chester W.] Nimitz coming through; he was then Lieutenant Commander Nimitz. And Commander Bill [William F.] Halsey, he came through my model house. They were all stationed in San Diego at that time; everybody who had anything to do with World War II, and the Japanese War, was stationed or came through San Diego. That was the big naval base for them, and I built ranch houses for many naval people.

But, anyhow, the third house-- One day a big car drove up, and a man came out and said he was Mr. C. Arnholt



Smith. He said his brother [John A. Smith] was going to build a big home in Los Angeles. He had told him about my house, and he wondered if I would be interested. And I said I certainly would. So he said he'll be coming down one of these days and I'll call you. So the date was made, and the house was on Altamirano Way. It has since had the catastrophe of a woman who couldn't afford to live in it after a divorce, she who turned on the shut-off gas meter. Nobody knew about it, so she turned it back on. She came home one night and lit a match and blew the house up. It burned to the ground. One of my best houses. I do have pictures of it though. She wasn't hurt or anything but the house burned.

The day came, and I was all dressed up ready to meet with Mr. Smith's brother who was the one who wanted to build a big home near Los Angeles. And he came. He came in a big Pierce-Arrow, the kind with headlights out on the fenders. [One of the] great big old automobiles. It had two men in front, two men in livery. One was driving, one was riding there all full of pomp and ready to do his ceremonies. They came to the house. He jumped out, and he ran around and opened the door for Mrs. Smith. And then he ran over [to the other side] and opened the door for Mr. Smith. They came towards me and said he was Mr. Arnholt Smith's older brother and they wanted to see the house. So



I took them through. I had a good time showing them the house. Mr. Smith smoked a big cigar, I remember. He was dark-haired, very handsome, and smoking this big cigar. Quite young, I guess maybe fifteen years older than I was.

So he told me that he had this property at La Habra. It was a big ranch, but he lived in the city, in Hollywood. But he wanted to move out to the country. He was a farmer at heart. Although he was in the oil business, he was a farmer at heart. He wanted to raise vegetables and fruits, and he wondered how much it would cost if I came up to do it. So I gulped hard and said I'd design it for him and come up as much as often for \$500. That was a lot of money, \$500. You could live five months on \$500. And so he said, "Well, that's interesting. You'll hear from me."

Anyhow, the word came to come up. So I went up and spent a wonderful day with them, and they took me out to the housing show at the Pan Pacific Auditorium. We looked at all kinds of things and new building materials. We went out to La Habra and saw the site, and then I drove home to San Diego and started drawing.

To make a long story, that's how I got the commission to design the house. I made more trips than you could shake a stick at. I used to come up; I would drive all night to get here. And then start work in the daytime and work all day and then go to the Mayflower Hotel for \$3 for



the night and then go across the street to the Biltmore Bowl. You could dance and hear Jimmy Grier's Orchestra and pay no cover charge before nine p.m. and have dinner for a dollar and a half. So those were my expenses for the trip up except for the gasoline. But, I made many, many trips, and the house turned out very fine. \*[I learned a great deal from Mr. Smith's father, who supervised and built it. Being on the San Andreas fault, it was built of solid reinforced brick with handmade floor tile and handmade mission tile roof.] It was published in many magazines, and many of the manufacturers used pictures to advertise their products, like Simon and Groutlock brick, and Thermador Electric. So it had lots of publicity.

But when he got all through, Mr. Smith paid me my balance. Then he said, "I know you haven't made any money on this job."

I said, "I know that. I didn't expect you to."

And he said, "You did not complain about it. I like that. I'm not going to give you any more money. That's not the way you do business. Business is business. But here's what I think. I think you should give up San Diego and come to L.A. If you want to do it, I'll back you."

And so I said, "Gee, I'd love to do that."

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





He said, "Well, you come up and look around."

So I did, and I decided I wanted to move to L.A.

So I came up, and we bought a lot and made a little contract. He put up the money, and I got a draw. He got interest, and I got the draw to live on. Then I started making the change to L.A. We immediately started building a house for sale in Stone Canyon of Bel-Air. We bought it from Mr. [Alonso] Bell, at 969 Somma Way by Stone Canyon Road. We built our first house together as joint venturers. He had a corporation, First National Finance Corporation, that did the financing and that was a front for him.

We then built the house, and as usual we had it just a short time. The widow of a great banker in Los Angeles in those days, the Farmers Bank-- Victor [H.] Rossetti was the great banker. That name will go down in history books as one of the first of the great bankers. He was as important to L.A. as [Amadeo P.] Giannini was to the Bank of America. His bank became the Security Bank finally. It was his widow who bought it, but she never moved in. She had a big house in Beverly Hills. She bought just because she liked it, I guess.

LASKEY: Now this was in Stone Canyon?

MAY: Stone Canyon.

LASKKEY: Now where was Mr. [J. A.] Smith's house?



MAY: Mr. Smith's house was in La Habra. There was a picture in one of the magazines that says the oil wells and the orange groves and the hills as far as you can see are his. The whole horizon is his ranch.

LASKEY: It was your California ranch-style house.

MAY: Yes. Being on the San Andreas fault, it's built with reinforcing. So it's never moved since the day we built it. And every material and detail was just as fine as you could do in those days. It was a good plan.

The plan is, again I keep saying over and over, the plan is what makes the house. If you have a bad plan, and you put gold all the way through it, or make it out of gold, it's not a good house. The plan is what counts. A good plan and bad materials is better than a bad plan with good materials. So it's got to be a good plan.

LASKEY: But you're obviously very interested in materials too.

MAY: Oh, yes. But plan first.

Then Mr. Smith and I wanted to build more houses, and we always sold them. I always sold my houses. They were unique, and there are always a few people who want unique things. It's just like custom clothes, I guess. They cost more. And I guess they are worth more. At least my wife tells me that. She buys clothes and still has them. [tape recorder turned off]



LASKEY: Before you left San Diego to come to Los Angeles, you built the first of your own houses of which there were to be a series.

MAY: Yes. I didn't know that they were going to be a series. I just built a house. In San Diego I built my first house for my family. It was on Adams Avenue, and it was what I called a rancheria. Everything else had been haciendas up to that point.

LASKEY: What was the difference?

MAY: [The] hacienda [has] a tile roof, Mexican, and [is] more husky in rafter sizes, and the walls are quite a little thicker. [But] the plan and the livability [are] the same in either; they are both California living. The rancheria is a coined name. It is a Spanish name meaning "covered thatch," like an arbor; that's called a rancheria in old California. But I called a rancheria sort of a coined name for a house, meaning the difference between hacienda, which is a tile roof, and a rancheria, which is a shingle roof. I did not have shakes on my first house, I just used shingles. It gave it a very much less expensive look. The shingles and the lightness of the beams. It made quite a bit of difference, but it was good to have another string in my bow because we used whitewashed interiors, whitewashed ceilings and lighter rafters, and it gave it more of a colonial look so that people who didn't



like the Mexican or the Spanish flavor, they had the pure ranch house. That's what made it a ranch house, not the Mexican hacienda as much as the rancheria. In the ranche-  
ria we had tile floors, the same as in the hacienda.

By this time, being my own house too, I was able to do more experimenting. You can't experiment when you are building for somebody else, because if you do, you're stuck with it. If it turns wrong, you lose your reputation. So I never do anything, and most builders won't do anything, unless I've seen it tried out a while. But they will try it out on themselves.

In this case, I had bought up what just recently turned out to be a very rare company, if I had kept it, from an art point of view. It was the Batchelder Tile Company. I bought the whole slug of it. They brought it down to San Diego on one of Mr. Miracle's trucks and put it on his vacant lot at his office. It was everything from floor tiles to wall tiles. They had these beautiful, beautiful patinas that Batchelder had worked out.

Now, I read about how he was one of the greatest tile men of all time. He had his kilns up at Malibu. I didn't realize the value of it. In fact, I used it in job after job after job. Mr. Miracle financed me on it, but we made money putting it in. We used it on a house in Coronado for a young lieutenant. We used some in my third house in Los





Angeles, bringing it back from San Diego. We used some [in] the bathrooms. We still had some left over, so we shipped it from San Diego back to Los Angeles and used it in some houses. It was finally used up.

But that was an interesting thing, because having all this tile, I wanted to make the rancheria for my first house with tile all the way through. So the minute they started to screed the cement slab level, so it was a wet slab, and they screed across it. I had a couple of men with me, and they immediately started handing me tile. I had another man help me, and we laid the tile as fast as they could lay the concrete. So, we paid no attention to partitions. We just cut around toilets where they stuck through and pipes and broke tile around for the bolts to fasten the mudsills to the slab. The tile went right on out to the edge of the slab so that the tile was on top of the slab, and then the mudsill was on top of the tile. In doing this, by nightfall we had laid the entire tile floor. Three of us in one day. Nowadays, they would lay it afterwards and cut every tile between every partition. We had no cutting at all. If it stuck out too far, we just let it stick out and then, after it dried, we broke it off. These are the kind of things you can do when you have no one watching you, like a building inspector, and you have the will to do it. Now, they make you check the slab and



they make you check this and they won't let you do that. And yet the house is still standing and standing beautifully, the last time I saw it.

The other things we did in my first own house was, I had them build the furniture again, and we had an all-brick patio laid in sand, which is the cheapest way to lay it. And we had moved in a proverbial olive tree. We used the outdoor furniture on wheels that I made.

LASKEY: The furniture was basically mission style?

MAY: Yes, Mission Monterey style. But I put wheels, big wooden wheels on it, like a carreta, which is a Spanish cart. I put handles on one end, so you could lift it and pull it around like a wheelbarrow. It was rather interesting. The coffee table had big wheels on it. It shows in a few pictures. Many of our buildings have been published.

In fact this house was well published. It first appeared in a magazine called Arts and Decoration. It was called, I think, "Grandchild of the Haciendas," or something to that effect. ["An Hacienda's Grandchild"] And as a result we had lots of people go through. We entertained a great deal, and people had gotten used to this different, forgotten style.

So, at that time we started getting orders for this type of a house. The Bonita Women's Club was sponsored and financed by a very wealthy woman, I may have spoken of her



earlier, Mrs. Hiram T. Horton. Her husband, with his brother, owned the Chicago Bridge and Iron Works, a big, big company out of Chicago. And she made a gift to the women of Bonita, which is a community where the Bonita Women's Club is, of the building. She wanted to know if I could build it for \$3,500. I said, "I'm sure I could."

So, we drew out one sheet of drawings. It was big. We made a big beamed ceiling, big beams in it, antique wood, wood floors, all on joists, which made it a cheap way of doing it. I built the whole thing well within the \$3,500 limit, and then she made a present of the clubhouse. It's called the Bonita Women's Club.

Just recently I had a letter from the chairman of the Bonita Women's Club. It was their fiftieth anniversary. She had to make a speech, and she wanted me to furnish her some information, which I sat down and did. She promised to send me some pictures of it, but I never--

Other houses while I was living in San Diego: there was a j.g. [junior grade] lieutenant, Nicholas J. Frank, and he was in the U.S.N. [United States Navy], an Annapolis graduate. He came to San Diego, stationed. We became friends through a mutual friend, and he asked me to build a house. We built them a house. That house brought the one next door for Colonel Matt Gardner, who was one of the leading fliers on the carriers during World War II. He



finally retired as Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet.

LASKEY: Now, you weren't flying yet?

MAY: I was not flying yet, no. You see, this was before '35. This was about '33 and '34. That was well before the war was even thought to be [imminent]. Although these boys knew they were working towards something, but they didn't know what. In fact, they told me that when they went through Annapolis they were trained to fight China. That was the big thing in those days. I was surprised it was Japan. I guess they were surprised too.

The rancheria, I call it ranch house, became quite popular. We always had the proverbial olive tree in the patio. There were all variations on it. We built about fifty-fifty from then on, 50 percent ranch houses and 50 percent haciendas, as we called them.

Then we had in Presidio Hills [the house] that Mr. Smith saw that had me go to Los Angeles. Then we had the Wade Langston [house]. They were a charming couple from the South, from Alabama, [who] came out there to live. They had seen my house and wondered if I'd build one for them in "La Jolla Hermosa," which is one of the delightful areas of La Jolla south of the main town. So, we built our first house there for them. They brought in the old things that I had not run into yet, really. I mean, I knew old





Spanish pieces, among the old grilles (rejas) that they had, but all new furniture I made. They brought an old wellhead from Spain, beautiful filigree lace ironwork, and they brought a pair of iron gates, which were lovely. We put them in between an arch, and I had my first taste of working old things into new architecture and giving the feeling of old. The house was very much of a success. It brought more houses, a house across the street, a house next door for Colonel and Mrs. O. H. B. Trenchard, then another house down the street, \*[and each new house brought another commission. At that time and for twenty years more, charging only one fee, I designed the house and others built it on contract.]

Then, about this time, Mrs. Horton had engaged me to do the Women's Club at Bonita. One day I had come up to visit her at her beautiful home, with Mr. Horton, and they said that they had some land they couldn't sell in La Jolla. They knew that I was building out there and asked if I would be interested in building some. And I said I would, and I said, "I'll talk to Mr. Miracle."

So, Mrs. Horton said, "Now, you've been in business long enough, so you just go ahead and do this for yourself. I'll arrange that for you." People seemed to help young

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



people in those days, not like they do now. Now, they don't think much of young people.

Anyhow, I talked to Mr. Miracle, and he was happy because he was just doing it to help me out. So if I had new wings, go fly with them. So, we made arrangements with Mrs. Horton, and she said she would pay me a profit on each one instead of working on a percentage. So, I quoted her a fee for every house I built, and they paid very promptly. They were lovely people to work with.

We built the first one, and she took a great interest in it. She was a great gardener and had a beautiful big home out at Bonita with a big swimming pool and stables and rolling acres, hundreds and hundreds of acres, and horses. I'll never forget their living room. It was twenty-by-thirty, which seemed so big to me (and so small fifty years later). The living room in my little house, the first one, was thirteen-by-twenty. Now here was one twenty-by-thirty, and I just thought how wonderful to be rich and have large rooms and space. Now we make them thirty-five-by-fifty-five all the time. But anyhow, their house worked well. The first house we built, Mrs. Horton came out and did the landscaping.

Then she threw me a curve. She said, "I want to really experiment with this house. You won't mind will you?"



"Of course, I wouldn't."

So, she wanted to paint the living room ceiling, which were open rafters, baby blue. She said, "Then you get the feeling of the sky. You get the feeling that there's no roof overhead and you feel like you're really out of doors."

Well, I went along with her. I didn't think much of it, but I never expressed my feelings. Anyhow, it sold very promptly. And I think it's still blue. [laughter] But it was nestled in the hillside and it was a very nice house and it was probably bigger than the next three we built for them, all with great ocean views and all on Hillside Drive in La Jolla. They had more property up the hill. So, we built one more hacienda type with tile roof and an arched doorway. Then we built three in a row with shingle roofs and picket fences, very much of an eastern look, which was good for people coming from the East.

And we seemed to get such nice people. Reuben Fleet had just come to San Diego with his big airplane factory. He was welcomed to become one of the leading citizens. And I think the city gave him all the land if he would bring his factory out. That was San Diego's first big attempt to go industrial. Everything had been parks and geraniums up to that time-- And the navy. But his daughter, Mrs. Alvin Nelson, Mr. Fleet's daughter, she took a fancy to one of



the houses. We became great friends. And she got them moved in. They had some wonderful furniture from the East, and we have some pictures of it. Beautiful colonial furniture that really fit in the house and gave it a completely different look [from] Colonial California, Monterey.

And then they had friends, and those friends bought more houses. It just seemed like it was that way all the time that I built. I can only think of one person in my whole time that really was not very happy to build for. Everybody was such good friends. We were all good friends. You couldn't do anything but please them, which you were delighted to do. So all you had to do was keep working until they were pleased. And there was never such a thing as cutting off the power if they didn't pay; they always paid.

I just came out with a wealth of wonderful friends. They go from Gianni Agnelli, who owns Fiat [Motor Company], to Bill Lear, who's Lear jet, and heads of corporations. They've just been wonderful to work with. I was fortunate in the fact that we built a sort of unique type of house because it was different from the rest. And as a result it probably stood out more, and as a result, we got people who were leaders who didn't want to conform. They didn't have to have a house with southern pillars because they had had





one in the South. They built what they wanted, and they knew what they wanted.

I think I told you, maybe I didn't, that when the banks were closed in San Diego, the big main bank there--- did I tell you this?--a gentleman came down, and nobody knew who he was, but he had plenty of money. He looked at houses around town, and then he hired me to build a house in Presidio Hills. That was Mr. Marston's subdivision, where I had been given a free lot to start things. He built the biggest house I had ever built up to that point except the [J. A.] Smith house. The building permit was taken out for \$10,000, for Alex Highland, his name was. It was the biggest permit issued since I had been in San Diego and was conscious of building permits. Let's say, the biggest one I had ever seen. Perhaps there was a bigger permit, but I hadn't seen it. But it was a big house. It was big, and they loved it. It had a second story. I came across pictures of it. It looked pretty good. I've gone by and looked at it. It really has stood up beautifully. It's a really good house. It hasn't dated an inch. The other box-type bungalow houses that were built in '32 are all obsolete, all old-fashioned. This house still is in good character, in good taste.

The thing about it, the strange thing, was that he came out and pretty soon he was head of the bank. The



government had sent him out to take over the bank that had gone under, but nobody knew it. When they closed the banks, before they opened it up, they had put him in there to take charge. So he was the head of the bank when I built the house.

Then we had houses in Loma Portal, which is another fine area out by Point Loma. We built one for one prominent young doctor. I remember a story that was funny. I came out one day. I used to visit my people and see how they liked their houses. And one day, when he was all moved in, he was in the patio and he had to duck when he saw me coming.

And he said, "Oh, it's you! Come on in. I'm flying my kite; I can't fly it out in the street because if a doctor flies a kite in the street, they'd think he was nuts!" [laughter] So, he was in the patio flying a kite.

And then we did one for Admiral [Ammen] Farenholt. He wanted a big two-story colonial, and he was set on a formal house with a door in the center and then two windows upstairs, one on each side, and two windows downstairs lining up with [those] upstairs on each side. It was a fine house. He was very pleased. Even though they would travel a lot, I guess, she was quite provincial, like she lived in the East. So we made it like a Monterey. It had a balcony in front and back. It was a Monterey style with



tile roof. It didn't look anything like an eastern house, at all. It had all the earmarks of a western house.

We had jobs out in the country. David Llewellyn, who was Llewellyn Iron Works, which up to when I came to L.A. built all the elevators before Otis [Elevator Company] came on the scene. They were elevator people here in L.A., and we built a horse ranch for him down in San Diego.

Oh, house after house, I can't remember them all. But, now we're going through our files, finding people that I had forgotten about. One was for Marston Burnham. They were a prominent family, and they were in the mortgage-lending business and insurance. It turned out to be that they were relatives of the famous Burnham of Chicago, the architect.

LASKEY: Oh, Daniel Burnham.

MAY: Daniel Burnham. They were relatives.

And we built a house up at Warner Hot Springs for the owner of the hot springs, Mrs. Warner. I had built these San Diego houses.

But, about that time I was moving into my house that I had started in Los Angeles. As soon as we sold the Stone Canyon house to Mr. and Mrs. Ney, we started building another house that we called the Lily Pond house. It was on a lot I had chosen in Mandeville Canyon, and it was right across the street from a lot that I had purchased for



my own use to build a house. Let's see, I paid \$1,500 for the lot. It was a half acre, and they gave me a 10 percent discount if I built within one year. Then Mr. [J. A.] Smith and I bought the Lily Pond lot, which was two lots. One had the whole lily pond on it, about 200-by-200. We put the house on the edge of the pond, with the lawn sloping down to the water. We bought a canoe and tied it up there, and it made a very beautiful setting. We have some beautiful photographs of it. And then we opened it for sale.

Then what happened was that we had the Gray Lines [Tours]. All the people who came out to L.A. in those early thirties, they'd get on a bus and go see movie star homes.

LASKEY: They still do.

MAY: They had a big bus that did that. So somebody told them it was the Lily Pons house. She was a great opera soprano at the time and very popular, so to go see Lily Pons's house, it was one of the great trips you could take. We never told them any differently. But they advertised it as the Lily Pons house.

One day I was-- By this time I had finished up most of my work in San Diego, although I was going back and forth, but I would sit on the house until we sold it. And my house was finished at the same time that the Lily Pond





house was, so I moved into Los Angeles by this time. This was '37.

LASKEY: Now did you move here because of the bigger market for houses?

MAY: Bigger market. And Mr. Smith told me that San Diego would never amount to anything, although he had investments down there. He didn't say it that way, he said it much better. He said, "You should get out of San Diego because there will never be any oil there. If you don't have oil, you won't have banking, and without banking, why, you're not going to have a very big city." And he said, "I think you should be up where the oil is. We know it is up there because we've got it, and you're never going to get it in San Diego."

And I said, "How do you know?"

He said, "It's real simple, because the way we drill the oil wells we always drill one well all the way down, as deep as we can go, to find out how much more there would be underneath. You just don't stop there on one well." And he said, "We've done it in San Diego, we've gone down as far as we think we should go and we start hitting the kind of land that is on top of the ground in Los Angeles."

And Mr. Smith was right. There are no big oil wells. They haven't even found gas down there. So that was the reason I changed. He was a very, very wonderful man. He



was very like my second father and able to do more than Dad did-- No, that's not true. But he was very much like a father. Anytime I would get in a bit of trouble, why, he was right by my side and pull me out and give me the business.

I'll never forget the first time I went down to visit him. I had come to L.A., and I think I had moved in then. So I had got the feel of Hollywood, you know, and L.A. and being a "big shot". So I bought a sport shirt and no necktie and went down to his office and went in. They finally ushered me in, and he took one look at me and said, "Where did you get that outfit?!"

And I said, "I thought I should dress like the Los Angeles people do."

He said, "You get right out of here and don't you ever come into this office again, don't you come near this office, without a necktie on! Do you understand that?"

And I said, "Yes, sir."

And I never came without a necktie. Recently, forty years later, I occasionally appear with no tie, but only when it is appropriate. He did so many things for me that very few people would've done. Mr. J. A. Smith really was a father to me. My dad, C. C. May, met Mr. Smith and thanked him for all the kind things he did to help my career, advice, encouragement, and all.



One time, the architects got after me for saying I was an architect. You know you can't say you are an architect, you can't hold yourself out to be an architect under the law, but you can write a letter to a prospective owner and say, This is to advise you that I am not an architect--- which then allows you to practice architecture. I always did [that].

I had the Stone Canyon house open for inspection. I loved my work, but sometimes got bored, even though I was young. At the end of a long day, someone came in [when] I was ready to close up the house. He was a little guy in to inspect the house. He drove up in a small, inexpensive car, and, from his looks, he could not afford the house. We were asking \$19,500, the lot cost \$9,500. This little fellow came in and walked around with his head up in the air. You can always tell a builder or someone in the trade because they always look up at the ceiling.

LASKEY: Oh, really?

MAY: They always look up at the ceiling, to see how it is built, I guess.

Anyhow, I walked him through and he didn't look like that much of a prospect, so I kind of let him go by himself. He came back to the front doors, and I was up there waiting.



He came back and said, "Are you the architect of this house?"

And I was so tired-- Usually I would always say, "No, I'm not. I designed the house, but I'm not an architect." But, I said, "Yes."

And he said, "OK, I'm Ben Silver." He pushed out his badge, took out his badge, and he said, "I'm on the Board of Architectural Examiners." He gave me his card, "Well, you come down and see me first thing tomorrow morning at my office."

Gee, I could have gone right through the ground, except I didn't. I went straight down to Mr. Smith's office, like going home to Father.

And Mr. Smith said, "He said that to you?" And he said, "He did? Well, you go and see Harold Morton." And Harold Morton was one of the great lawyers in those days. And one of the three that ran the Independent Oil Producers Association. John Smith, Harold Morton, and William Kech, the oil man from the Superior Oil Co., [the three] were partners in a corporation called Independent Petroleum Producers Association. They were all in the oil business, and they had the best of lawyers and they had the best geologists, as proved by their record.





So I went right over to Mr. Morton's office. He came out and said, "John tells me that you have a problem. Come see Chet Dolly. He's our bright young man here."

I went in to [Chester F.] Dolly and told him what the architectural inspector had said. And he said, "Oh, that's no problem." And Chester Dolly said to relax, nothing to worry about, that he'd take care of it.

So he wrote a letter to Ben Silver and sent me a copy. He said, "I'll take care of it." And I received a copy the next day, and it said: "Dear Mr. Silver, You have made threats against our client, Cliff May. Will you please file charges immediately, and we will produce him on twenty-four hours notice."

That's the last that we ever heard of Mr. Ben Silver. So that's the kind of protection that I got in the old days, and then I learned--

Then about that time, Mr. Smith said, "You'd better start learning what makes the world go around." He said, "You should do this: go after the architects."

So I had a couple of builders that thought we ought to, and a couple of architects thought we ought to-- There were several architects who thought the architects were being too tough. Vincent Palmer was one. They were at that time, they would-- After you graduated from college, you had to have ten years training in an architect's office



before you could take the examination. I didn't want to be an architect, but Mr. Smith thought I ought to learn what makes things go.

I'll make it real short. They had their assemblymen and senators that the oil companies backed, in Sacramento. So Mr. Smith wrote a bill, had one [an assemblyman or senator] write him up a bill.

[The architects] were always after the builders to stop drawing plans. I was invited to a couple of architects' meetings where the speakers spoke about how the builders, how they should open up and have more architects and do better work and take more money and get architects to do this instead of just a few chosen few. There was this boy who said that they would have a better profession if they did that, but then nobody bought that.

So, anyway, Mr. Smith said, "They got the architects' bill through when the earthquake shook down Long Beach. Why aren't the architects checking their own buildings when they shook down, but they blamed the builders? Their own builders didn't follow the drawings."

So Mr. Smith's friends proposed an architects bill [that] they had to be licensed. And then they put through what they call the Riley Act, which is the earthquake ordinance that all schools have to be built by a licensed engineer or architect.



So the bill [was introduced] that all the architects had to be reexamined. And oh, gee, they [the architects] were up in arms. We did that to help the builders.

I was on the Building Contractors Association board of directors, and we were putting up money for our bills. The architects were putting up money for their bills. And so we fought and we fought. They would get almost ready to go in, and we would write letters and send them up to Sacramento and lobby and work away. I was learning all this, what makes the world go. And the architects would do the same, and then we would come. . .

The last time, they would say, "Well, we can't do it this time; we can't get enough votes." And so down it would go.

So it would be another two years before they would reintroduce the bill, and so up they would come again. We did it for about ten years, just fighting it out all the time and trying, you know. They're trying to knock us, and we're trying to knock them.

And one day, somehow a truce was made. I remember Harry Hanson and Paul Burkhardt of the builders and myself and some of the architects said, "Let's just stop this fighting business," We said, "Let's not do it this year." So we agreed we wouldn't.



All of a sudden we got a call from the assemblyman, "We've got a bill ready to go, and we'll vote for you." And we never even asked him to. So, then we found out that that's the way they do it. They take in these bills, and they take in these suckers like we were, and they would get donations to their campaigns, and then they'd [introduce] the bill, but then they'd never put it through. You'd think that they were going to. This was the old days now that I'm talking about. And maybe it has been cleaned up, and maybe it hasn't. I knew many of the men who later on ended up in the government. One of the great ones was one of our big supervisors here. He was the boy who used to sit outside the door, and he used to check us into the assembly or into the senate room. He would just check you off, and he later became one of our supervisors. One of the men is still in the assembly that we used to work with, Ralph Dills.

It was great learning, but I don't know why I'm talking about this except that it was all part of learning economics from Mr. Smith, what to do and what not to do. It was just a wonderful association. With that, we went on to buy this Riviera Ranch land from his ranch company that ran seventy-six lots.

He said, "Do anything you want with it."

And I said, "I'd like to make big, big houses on it."





And he said, "Fine. Go ahead. It's yours."

So I designed it for about twelve big houses, and then he looked at it, the engineer and Mr. Smith, and so he said, "If we'd put a few more lots in there we'd make more money."

And that was my downfall, I shouldn't have done it, because it was so great and would be more like Bel-Air. So we stuck in about six more lots, and the six more lots just made it good, but not great. It's great now because we restrict the architecture to nothing but ranch houses that we built.

I was the designer and builder all this time, but I didn't do any drawings for anybody else, only for myself. I designed them and I built them. So I had one fee for two jobs. The people had to sign up that they would have me build it, or I wouldn't give them a deed until the contract was signed and legal. So that way I was able to control the architecture. I could put a kitchen next to a kitchen on one house and a bedroom next to a bedroom, instead of a kitchen next to a bedroom. We made forty feet between houses, which meant a vacant lot between every house, almost a vacant lot by most city standards.

We had wonderful [plans. We wanted to] put [in] a big gate. I'll never forget it. Now they want to put it in. We were way ahead of them. In 1939 we designed the



gates, a big pair of gates nobody gets in. Now they're talking about putting gates, if they can stop the other people from coming through on account of the public street. We designed a big stable up where the school is now, where the Trancas stable is now. We had a great big stable planned for that, for the people that lived in the group. So the plans were great, but as I say, we kind of cheapened it by making them a little smaller.

At that same time the war was getting ready to break, and it broke. Then that stopped all building. By that time I had going a great house. Some of the UCLA people say it's my masterpiece, next to my own, and I think it probably is. That was building, and I had other things going when the freeze-- They froze all building. Everything under construction they gave a permit to finish.

And at that time Smith said, "I've got some land down at Wilmington, an oil-well field that didn't come in, and it is just right to build war-worker houses in Wilmington. Let's look at it." So I went down and looked at it and I designed a house to go there, a whole tract of houses.

And then it came the time when Mr. Smith said, "You can't do two things and do them well." Which I sure learned. He said, "You can't build cheap houses and build good houses. You must make a choice. You can either build



down there and build more houses, or you can build up here and build good houses."

I had enough big houses going to keep me busy, so I opted to build big houses. Which I'm glad. And I gave the plans over to another set of builders that we had had. He went on to build it with another set of builders.

LASKEY: What was the house that you think was your masterpiece?

MAY: It was a house that I built for a man named Frederic M. Blow. And how I got-- Did I give you that?

LASKEY: No.

MAY: And how I got these people I don't think that-- It's unusual, but they like what we did. One day, a wonderful woman, Mrs. Juliet Van Rosendahl--who passed away just this last year, and I regret that I didn't get to see her more in her later years--came to my house. I had just built it, and I had my homemade furniture from San Diego in it.

Everything was homemade and mainly Spanish, but it was a ranch house with wall-to-wall carpet; I thought it was great, which I think is terrible now, but at that time [I thought] it was great.

LASKEY: Very popular then.

MAY: It was the only thing. We had the best kind. The war was on, but it was really good.



She said she had heard of the house, and she wondered could she see my house, and I took her in. She went all through it, and she was very lovely. Anyway, she was a coach for Bette Davis and all the young girls that were coming in as movie actresses but who needed that finesse of how to put their gloves on and how to take them off and how to speak French and manners and carriage and all the things that they have to learn. And she was this high-powered coach and knew everybody.

So she said, "Number one, I think your house is great, but I think the furnishings are very bad and you should find out right now."

LASKEY: Now what house are you talking about?

MAY: My second house in Los Angeles. [CM No. 3]

LASKEY: Your own second house.

MAY: I had moved to Los Angeles by then when this happened. And I said, "What am I going to do?"

And she said, "Well, you go see Paul T. Frankl." I had never heard of him. And, she said, "He will help you. And you stay with him. Between you and Mr. Frankl and your house, you will really have something."





JUNE 9, 1982

MAY: I immediately went down to meet Mr. Paul Frankl. He was gracious and showed me some very exciting photographs and furniture he had in a beautiful studio across the street from the Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire [Boulevard]. The upshot of it was that he came out the next day or so and looked my house over and made suggestions. I immediately switched the basic furniture in the living room and dining room, I believe, to Frankl furniture. He gave me a lot of encouragement and help.

It was the beginning of a long friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Frankl and their daughter, Paulette, who was the age of one of my daughters. You might say, that "horsewise," they grew up together. The Frankls were interested in horses for their only child, and of course we had horses, so they visited us a great deal. In the meantime, Paul worked with me on nearly every job I could steer him to. I'm talking about the [Frederic M.] Blow job, and, when we were on the Blow job, he did the rattan and the tropical furniture for the playroom, which was a very outstanding room. The Blows, of course, wanted all the old-fashioned French furniture like she had in the south of France; she used to call it the "Souths of France."

Mr. Blow was a very good friend of Mrs. Van Rosendahl. One day she came to my house and said, "I need to see you



immediately. I have a friend who's arriving this afternoon. He'll be here for two hours. If you can find a lot and you can design a house while he's here for two hours, why, he'll leave the money and you can build it while he's gone."

I said, "Well, I've got the lot, I can assure you of that."

And so I set right to work. She brought him out two hours later. They were on a boat on an around-the-world cruise, Mr. and Mrs. Blow. She was a charming, beautiful French girl. Mr. Blow, I found out later, was one of the heirs to the Westclox fortune. Money was no object. Mr. [John A.] Smith and Mr. Blow were the first two real millionaires I worked for. I mean, millionaires!

He liked the plan. In fact, I showed him our house, and I showed him the Lily Pond house. I used the Lily Pond house for an example. I said, "It'll be just like this, even with the white-painted tile roof. There'll be a specification here on the plan."

So he said, "That's fine. OK --F.M. Blow." Then he gave me his card and said, "Call this bank and they'll [set up an account] before I go. Just draw on it."

And that was all the contract we had. So away I went.  
LASKEY: Now, where was the lot?



MAY: It belonged to Mr. Andrew [M.] Chaffey, who was another old famous banker. He started the California Bank, lived in that area, and had a lot of property. This one piece was for sale. He was saving the piece next to it, which was to the south and higher up on Oakmont, higher in elevation but lower towards the ocean on Oakmont Drive. He was saving it for his own future home to be built. I met Mr. Chaffey through the engineer that did our Riviera Ranch subdivision and did a lot of subdivision engineering and land development work for me. The upshot was that Mr. Chaffey sold us the lot and we immediately went to work on the house.

When the Blows came back, it was all finished. We had the swimming pool and we had-- I guess they sent sketches back for the furnishings, and then they brought a lot of furniture out when they came. Mrs. Van Rosendahl helped. She had exquisite taste. It turned out to be one of our great houses.

But secretly, Mrs. Blow was a little disappointed. She was hoping to have what she called a "Souths of France" house, and this was really a western floor plan and it had western materials. So a few years later Mr. Blow had his eye on the lot next door that Mr. Chaffey was going to build on, and he wondered if there would be any way he could buy it. This was still pretty deep depression; this



was way before '39. This house was built in '37 [or] '38, because it was before the war that we got the house above and started building. It was during the war that they stopped the construction. Mr. Blow made an offer that Mr. Chaffey could not refuse, and so Mr. Chaffey sold the land to us and we built a great house.

We'd become very great friends socially. They were at our place, and we were at their place. And they loved to entertain; parties were going on all the time at the house next door which they were living in. The other one was to be built. They would go back to Paris for three or four months at a time.

The upshot of it was that at the time we were working on drawings, Mrs. Blow seemed a little unhappy and said she wanted a house with big towers and winding stairways. So Freddie Blow said he knew an architect who was really quite a wonderful architect, and wondered if I would mind having an associate with me. I said, "Gee, I would love it." His name was Wallace Frost. He taught me so much about stone. I didn't know anything about stone at that point. I knew how to make adobe bricks, that's about all, but not a real cut-stone house like they do in the East.

So Mr. Frost came out, took my drawings, and kept the same floor plans, which is an important thing to me because the floor plans are the way you live in California, and he





adapted the stonework of the south of France, with corbels and moldings and architraves and cut fireplaces and cut columns and chiseled stairs and stone floors. All that he gave me, the know-how to do it.

The first lesson was we had to get some stonemasons, no more bricklayers around here, and there weren't any stonemasons. Old ones, he wanted old ones. Finally, we found a group of them out at Forest Lawn, and they were available. They came over and did our stonework. Moonlighted, I guess, when they didn't have something to do and they had to leave for a few days.

It was all quarried out in the Santa Ynez Canyon, which is the last canyon as you go toward the ocean. There's a big quarry there. They'd go out in the field, and they'd pick out big pieces of stone [from] the side of a mountain. They'd say, "This is the way the grain is." Then they would mark it, then they would get cutters in, and they would cut it and chisel out. We had pieces of stone that would be eight feet long and two feet high and fifteen inches wide that wouldn't break; they were cut for lintels.

It was a house that could never be built again. In those days those masons, those engineers, and the mechanics were master craftsmen. They don't have them anymore. You



might find one here but not enough to build a house. Just no way.

We started out to build the spiral stairs. Each [step] was cast and then chiseled out of stone. It started up at a certain point and when it got a certain tread on the top of the last tier, that had to be level with the door going outdoors, which had been already built out of stone. And you can't stretch the stone, it had to be right on. And it was right on. Those things you could not do today, even with our advancements in surveying. You don't have the men who can do it.

LASKEY: Were the floors stone, too?

MAY: The floors were stone. Except we had plank floors in some places and old handmade tile in some other places. It was furnished beautifully. It was just built for their own unique way of living. Great for entertainment. It had a wonderful library, with big panels in it. I learned so much from paneling that I did not know at the time. Every job I do I guess I learned on it; I tried never to make the mistake again.

LASKEY: Now I think at one point the Blow house was remodeled or sort of defaced--

MAY: Mrs. Blow passed away, unexpectedly. Quite young. Mr. Blow was quite upset and lived there for quite a few years. Then we built a small house down below, a



guesthouse for him. Then he moved in there, because it was just too big for him by himself. Later on he-- I was real busy and I don't know how it happened. It never should have happened. But another architect came along, and he built a house on another piece of the lot that he and I had developed together, a subdivision. This was leftover, so he used that for a house.

It wasn't a very good house. He didn't like it too well, because after having the other two it was quite a comedown. The guesthouse I built for him was really spectacular. It was just a three-room house with a great big plate-glass window about eighteen feet high. You entered on the balcony. It was on the side of a hill. Then you looked down two stories, from one story down to the other and then up through the glass. Anyhow, Mr. Blow then moved up to Santa Barbara, and all he took with him was a few real wonderful pieces of furniture. He passed away. We'd see him when we'd go up there. We saw him quite a few times, but all of a sudden they said he'd been dead for about a half a year. Quite shocking to me. Susie was buried out in a Catholic cemetery at Playa del Rey. That's the last we heard of Freddie.

Freddie's uncle owned the big ranch called the San Fernando Rey, which was purchased from Mr. Blow's uncle by John Galvin. That's one of the big brick Santa Barbara



ranches. We built a house on that for Mr. Galvin later on. In fact, it was a school. We worked on his house that was designed by Joe Pluckett, who was one of the great Santa Barbara architects, who is deceased. The present owner of the school we built for the Galvins is Mike Nichols. It was a school for three children. I'll never forget; the Galvins were one of my very wealthy clients. My first question about this time became, "What budget shall we plan for?" Because so many times I'd design the wrong kind of a house, not knowing they wanted a big house, or designing a big house and they wanted a little house. So I've got to find out where they are, really. And I said, "I'm like a doctor, you've got to tell me where the aches are before I can properly come up with what you want."

Anyhow, Mr. Galvin to my question answered, "Mr. May, that is none of your business, and anything Mrs. Galvin wants, she can have."

So she said, "I want all the walls three feet thick."

So he said, "That's what we will have."

It didn't have to be, but she wanted them three feet thick. I said, "Well, it's going to make the rooms very dark because the walls will be so thick."

He said, "That's the way she wants it, isn't it?"





I said, "That's right." So, I said, "And we'll have a beautiful skylight that will let in the sunshine and you'll have all the thick walls."

And he said, "That's fine."

So that saved me, because you couldn't have done it without skylights. That was the beginning of our skylights, one of the early beginnings.

LASKEY: What year was this?

MAY: That was in, golly, I'm guessing now, it was right after the Pacesetter [House], '45, '48. It was interesting though, because it was a school for his three children. They didn't want them to go to public school. Private school was good enough. So, we built the school. We had the piano practice room all soundproofed so they could practice piano. They hired a piano teacher from some conservatory in the East. She came out with her child. They hired the head of the English department at Stanford University for the English teacher. The equestrian teacher was the coach for the Olympic team in horsemanship. And he had this kind of staff, about five people. Some of them could teach two languages. Each of them had one or two children, so with their three children they had about five or six children in the school. They were given homes built on the place and complete board and everything. It was



real good. Then Mr. Galvin tired of that holding and went to live in Ireland.

LASKEY: And just left the school?

MAY: Yes. He sold the ranch, but he kept the big cattle part. That's where the Rancheros Visitadores ride is every year. And the little boy when I built the house is living on the ranch; he's a grown man. He's in complete charge of this big ranch.

## SECOND PART

JULY 21, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. May, you're noted particularly for the development of the ranch style, and I thought this might be a good time for you to discuss what the ranch style or ranch house is and how you happened to develop that style.

MAY: All right, I guess style is a word, and you know the words style and fashion, you can get into a lot of that. I'm sure the ranch house has never been in fashion because, as I understand it, fashion comes and goes. Style is developed and built upon and stays with us. The ranch house, I think, goes back to the first primitive people who came to this part of the country, and from there it goes back to the first primitive people who were in Spain and Andalusia and the Italian and the warm belt all around the world. Before we had architects and professional builders, people built by their own hands to protect themselves from



the climate. You see ice houses made out of blocks of ice in Iceland and Eskimo land, and then you see somebody living under trees in the [tropics].

What I'm saying is, not facetiously, is that the fundamental of any area is that [people] build with the materials at hand. Obviously, [there was not alternative] before we had the technology we needed to put things together like cement and sand to make cement tile. So they used the materials they had. I actually know of history, without studying somebody else's history, just by observation, going back to about 1800 when the Estudillo house we talked about earlier was built in 1825 and the missions were being built here in California. I worshipped in them and attended mass in them as a child and realized that here was material that was just the earth of the area piled into big chunks. That was brought here, of course, by the padres from Spain, when they came over to populize and discover the new country. So the adobe brick goes back to Roman times. And, if you go back to Roman times, it goes back to Egyptian times. You can go back as far as you want to. It's just using the earth. So it's just native material.

Later, architects would come and be real smart and use native materials. Smart people were using that before these new architects were ever born. It makes so much more sense, because, number one, it's cheap and you can use it



with your own hands. Also, it fits in colorwise and temperaturewise because it's mud or stone, as the case may be, or a mixture. The walls, of necessity, would be very thick. It's what we call gravity architecture. In other words, the wall is so thick that it can't fall over because of its own inertness and its own weight. And that's best exemplified by the first early California houses. They were built around courtyards for protection, but also they did not have any possibility for making great big spans like they do now, to make a room thirty feet wide. Well, of course missions did; they had tremendous labor and tremendous wealth. But the average person, I'm speaking of domestic architecture, he could not make great spans other than the side of a tree he could cut and drag with his animals or his friends, which gave you this span between the two walls, where the tree became, in Spanish a viga. In the tropics they have another name for it. I think viga is what it's called also in New Mexico. So there we have materials determining the plan for the house.

The plan of the house is the most important thing of anything in architecture. You can have the greatest building site in the world and have a bad plan, one that doesn't work, one that is inconvenient, one that's expensive to operate in, one that wastes time, one that's dangerous. I could go on with ten more items that would





make the plan not good. No matter how much money you spent for it, no matter what great workmanship you put into it, if the plan is not good, it won't be a good house. So, we go back to the plan.

To go back to the California ranch house, why it's endured is because the plan has been shaped by the materials. The materials are native, and they go well with the community. And they're cheap. So that's the thing we're having trouble with right now: everything costs too much. Of course, it's labor that makes it cost now. In the old days, labor was free. You call that the "sweat equity." They got their labor for nothing. One day of their life they contributed towards building their house.

The ranch house grew from the original, little, narrow-winged house build around a courtyard, and many times not so little. By the use of buttresses they were able to get bigger spans as the trees they collected were larger. Then they came up with the age-old idea of using posts to support the beams. If you wanted to make a wider living room, let's say, they would put a post in the center and it would support two trees, butt to butt. They would tie them together with rawhide, wet it, and then it would dry and it would shrink and tighten up. They had a certain amount of iron that they used to forge pieces of steel to hold things together. Mainly, the first ones I guess were rawhide.



The plan, I'm getting back to the plan, the plan of the California ranch house is what has made it survive.

The first houses were built in 1800. The Estudillo house, which was one of the grand houses of its time, was 1825. Santa Margarita was one of the great, great houses that was somewhat later, about 1830, 1835, and it was considered one of the prize houses in California. Very few people saw it up until the Marine Corps took over the Rancho Santa Margarita portion. My aunt continued to farm on the de las Flores portion, because she had a life tenancy. She farmed on that until her death, which was about twenty years ago, at which time the Marine Corps took it over. They have left the old building, which is sort of a shame, because they're not taking very good care of it.

Adobe went up and down the coast of California. Monterey had adobe, but they had the influence of the Yankee sea captains, which is all pretty common knowledge. They came in with their picket fences and their two-story effect and their stairways and balconies and railings the way they built them back East. They built around the chimney and that gave them the square block, and the Monterey was just a variation on that. Instead of being a square block it became a big rectangle in which the fireplaces were all in the center. It would be double fireplaces, fireplaces and hearth on both floors with the flues



going on up. It had to have four fireplaces to heat the house, and that pretty well established the type we call the Monterey. Then there's the combination of the Monterey and the one-story ranch house, which is partially two-story and partially one-story.

LASKEY: I'm not familiar with that. I'm trying to think of an example.

MAY: Well, the Customs House at Monterey is a two-story Monterey. And the Larkin House is a very famous house. It has a balcony the entire length of the building. The plan is a rectangle, and the bedrooms are all upstairs generally.

LASKEY: This is the Monterey--

MAY: That would be the Monterey type, yes.

LASKEY: That's a very distinctive kind of an architecture, opposed to the ranch [style] that we were talking about.

MAY: Yes and no. It's distinctive in that you look at it and say, "That's Monterey." It has the materials of the ranch house, and it has everything but the plan. That's why I said the plan is so important. I wouldn't give you a nickel for a Monterey house against a ranch house if I had to live in it. The Monterey is more compact; you enter into the entrance hall through the front door, then there's usually an overhanging balcony so the front door is protected from the rain, which is great. But once you go inside



you're in the same thing I've fought against--the box. A plan that is a box, a square that started with the old Cape Cod. All the houses of the East, from Cape Cod down to the thousands of houses that Bill [William J.] Levitt and his associates built after World War II. They're all variations of the box, we discussed that before, with a garage in the back. I think Bill's big contribution was putting the garage up in front and making the house look bigger. But still you walk in and all the rooms are within four walls.

LASKEY: The box.

MAY: Then we have the box within a box, and that's even worse, whereby you just take the one big room which you used to have, which was a great room, and break it up into smaller rooms, kitchen in one, dining room in one, living room in one, and a bedroom in one. So you had the box within a box. The lack of cross-ventilation which they have is not present in the ranch house. The ranch house opens on two sides at least, sometimes three sides, so you have a breeze blowing through the ranch house. Four [forms], I've spoken before, gives you the protection from the elements. In some parts of it, you can have your poppies outdoors, you can entertain outdoors in privacy. In our modern day that's wonderful because you have a





hundred foot lot, and you have a courtyard and have another world inside of your courtyard.

Many people in the East call what we call a patio an atrium, atrium meaning, I guess, being covered with glass. Ours were covered many times with canvas when canvas became available from the old ship sails. Sailing ships with old canvases they used to make-- We call them sky shades now, but they were all patio covers. You see them all through the Mediterranean areas, where they are sometimes two stories high, but they protect the streets from the sun. Again, the Monterey house couldn't do that because it's a box. The ranch house could do it because it has a patio and a courtyard that you can cover.

Then again, when you're in a Monterey type-- I know when I say Monterey I'm only comparing that as being an opposite type but similar and a relative to the ranch house. When you're inside, you're looking out the window and you're looking at the street or the backyard. In those days they liked to look at the street where the action was. When you take that type of architecture and bring it down to the present day, why, you're looking at traffic on the street, or else you're looking at your neighbor besides you, or else you're looking at your backyard. The courtyard in our type of house which I took a fancy to in my experience living on the Las Flores and the Santa Margarita



ranches and visiting the Estudillo house and others, and being in those types of houses, I just inherently realized how much better the living was than in the typical house which was being built when I was a boy, being raised in 1908 and on. When I became conscious in 1910, 1915, why, everybody was living in boxes.

Since I talked to you, I was back in San Diego, and I took my camera with me this time and went back to where I was born. Across the street were the four Irving Gill houses. One of them was so overgrown I couldn't get close enough to get a picture of it, but I got a picture of the three others. Irving Gill, famous Irving Gill and all of the great things he contributed, it still is a box and it's just a box with Irving Gill's trademarks on it. When you look at it, you know it's not another house; it's by somebody who knew what they were doing. The single-car garage was the vogue in those days, because nobody had the money to have two cars. So they always had a single-car garage out front, which is modern. You knew that it wasn't an old California bungalow when you see it. But you look at it, and it doesn't have [room for living], because as I say, I was raised in those houses and my neighbors' children.

LASKEY: You must have a great deal more flexibility in the ranch house than in the--



MAY: That's right because with a plan we can make a ranch house straight like the Monterey, with its curves, but it's also the economy, four corners. We can then make an L. The L can protect you and give you cross-ventilation. Then we can go to the U, [or] close the fourth side in and make it a complete O, a closed view. Then we can put a second story on one portion of it, which we did a lot of times. Many times we'd make the open U, then put the second story on the center section so you could have a complete patio with a balcony looking down into the courtyard. And that was what we called a Monterey adaptation--a ranch house, Monterey-type.

With the ranch house, you can leave the four forms I first spoke of and you can go on and make an X, and you can make a Y, and you can make a Z, and you can make it any form you want. With that, in my work, we could point a wing at the rising sun for the breakfast room where the kitchen would be. Or you could point the living room and the master bedroom to the south where the best exposures are. It's like a piece of rope, you could bend it around and get the absolute best out of it.

Our first houses were on reasonably sized lots. We started on lots as small as fifty by a hundred. My first house was that small. We came out right to the property line with the house, which we owned, and at that time the



zoning didn't stop you. Then sixty years later, someone came up with the great idea that if you built to the property line you'd pick up four feet. When I built my first house, we did that. Granted it wasn't a great thing to do because it took four feet away from the neighbor who then didn't have the ventilation, but it was the beginning of land use to get the maximum use out of the land.

There's a subdivision down in San [Juan] Capistrano that did one of the best jobs I've ever seen, that I saw about fifteen or twenty years ago. All of the houses were designed right to the property line, and then, they had courtyards so that you didn't know who was on the other side. With that, each person gained four to five feet on the length of his lot.

LASKEY: Well, I've always been curious about that because particularly in the Mediterranean and in Mexico, that's the way the houses are built, you know, the facades to the street, with the interior open, which gives you a lot of privacy, also a lot of air, and freedom in this kind of climate. So I've been curious why builders here didn't adopt that style. It makes sense.

MAY: Mainly, I think it starts way back in George Washington's time, or at the time of the Frenchman [Pierre] L'Enfant, who laid out Washington, D.C. They decided that everybody would have a lawn in the front and, besides that,





lines and sidelines. When they got to land planning, their idea of land planning, they didn't want to get the density, because we had a tremendous amount of land in the United States in those days when the country was aborning. That just seemed to become the way they did it.

When I became conscious of houses, why, everything was fifty-, sixty-, seventy-foot lots, and a hundred foot deep. The big improvement in those days [was that] they had alleys. In the alley they picked up all the garbage and trash, and that kept the front of your house pretty clean. That's what Beverly Hills did and still does. But L.A. does not, so we have this tremendous amount of garbage once a week out on the street, which the dogs and the cats dump over. It's a real problem, which will be solved one of these days.

Tell you a quick story: Herbert Hoover was president of the United States, and we were getting ready not to have-- Things were getting a little bit tough, the boom was on, but he realized that we had to make progress. So they had a housing conference in 1928 or '29. Which I have a copy of someplace, I hope I can find it someday. They just kicked around, like the Rand Corporation now does, ideas what we have to do to make this civilization work better. And somebody said, "We have to grind up garbage; we can't



take garbage down the streets in trucks like we do. We've got to grind it up."

Somebody said, "Well, what do you do with it?"

"We will put it down the sewer."

They said, "Impossible."

But immediately, in '32, I had a garbage grinder made by General Electric. They made the first one, and away they went. It was just one man's idea, but it made a tremendous impact. Soon out went the alleys in subdivisions, because down the street went the garbage. Then the tin-can smasher came along, and then, also, though it never did go, they had gas appliances which you put in all kinds of trash--paper, cardboard, weeds, and green flowers that you were going to throw out. By slow gas action, it just dried it all out, and it all came out powder. I had one in one of my houses, until one day I put a sack of old walnuts infested with bugs and about burned the house down.

[laughter]

LASKEY: Really. What happened?

MAY: I overloaded it. It just got tremendously hot and started smoking. The vent wasn't big enough for it. That was the early days, when they were learning. Then they learned how to take care of that. They still haven't learned how to take care of the trash. We make more trash than anyplace in the world. You can see how that simple



thing, the garbage grinder, did affect our subdivisions by finally getting garbage trucks off the streets, because a garbage truck going down an alley isn't as bad as parked out in front of your house, where your cars and people are arriving at the front door.

LASKEY: Trash is one thing, but garbage is something else.

MAY: That's right. So we keep making progress, but the ranch house has outlived them all. It's still popular. It was popular back in those days, and after World War II it became the most popular. It passed the Cape Cod, which was the most popular prior to World War II. Good Housekeeping magazine kept quite a record on that. I think the magazine's fallen, but Good Housekeeping was one of the household magazines that really was, I guess, sort of a bible to most women.

LASKEY: Can you trace the movement across the country of the ranch house?

MAY: Yes. If you go through the South you see many houses that aren't ranch houses but live like ranch houses. That would be like in New Mexico. They had the pueblo style that came, but the pueblo style had courtyards. In fact, the Pueblo Indians built the big pueblos around great courtyards. The Taos Indians have a tremendous courtyard inside, with the buildings all around the outside, of course, for protection.



The ranch house kind of went into nonpopularity when labor started to come in. When the forty-niners came out, they wanted quick housing. Except for the forty-niners who married into the old families, they didn't know what was going on in the way of good living. They just threw up shacks, as you know, everyplace, anyplace. Monterey grew slowly and they had some houses that were built then. But the era of the great old house went out, I'm guessing, around the sixties or seventies, and around the eighties and nineties after the gold rush was over and things had settled down. After California became a state in 1849, I think it was, or the year 1850, the influx of people was just tremendous. They brought with them the knowledge of the East, and by that time lumber was being cut into boards to make houses. We had the eastern know-how coming out to do the designing, and with the wonderful mild climate, at least in the southern parts of California and in the eleven western states, some people just built as they knew how to build.

Going back into it, there was no one person when I started it, I would say, who built ranch houses. A lot of the old-timers built ranch houses because they built just in a natural way, as we said, to protect themselves and that was the best way to do it. With the boards coming out and with the sawmills coming--I think Sutter's Mill was a





sawmill that was sawing boards when they discovered gold. But the boards made a board-kind of a building, and that's why San Francisco is so filled with just these board houses smack up against one another going up and down the hills. Except out on the ranches and down on the peninsula, you'd see nothing but shacks.

Of course, there were great palaces, but the great palaces were just the same as the great palaces were in Europe or in the eastern United States in the late nineteenthies.

But the ranch house, when I became conscious of what houses were, there were none built. Gill built the closest thing. He did spread out a few. He built a box of a house, then he'd connect it with a long portico of arches that created a feeling of space and a feeling of a courtyard. But the ones that he did in my neighborhood were not what you would call ranch houses. They were California and Gill's were old California. Distinctive. The Frank Lloyd Wright houses, I don't think there were any in San Diego that I knew of, ever.

LASKEY: There are some [R. M.] Schindler houses there.

MAY: Schindler houses, but they were glass and two-story. I don't know enough about it to say. I know they were there, and they created a great effect and had a great influence. But there's not a Schindler house going that I



can't figure out that a ranch house is twice as good to live in.

People don't know how to live. People just do not know how to live. They live like they were taught. Elizabeth Gordon of House Beautiful told me time and again, "Don't forget now, people can't judge any better than they know." You can give them a fine glass of the greatest cabernet sauvignon and take a glass of dago red and give it to an Indian, I mean just anybody who doesn't know, and seldom can they tell which is the great wine. They can be influenced by your expressions as you taste it, and they follow you. They don't just say, "This is great" or "This is not good." Unless you have a taste, a natural taste, why, you can't tell.

And that goes for living. Some people, you see them in pictures, they sit down. They pass the big dish, and they pass around the plates. Some have French service, European service. If they have help, then the plate is passed to them. That's taste.

If you're going to build a house for somebody, then you say, "What kind of a house are you going to have?" If they're going to have the kind that they put a stack of dishes in the kitchen and stick everything on one plate and everybody carries their own plate in, that's going to be one kind of a house. If you have a house that they have



china, fine china, and sterling and crystal, and it would require a butler's pantry to store it in, why, that's going to be a different kind of a house. And so again we are back to the plan.

The kind of house is no better than the plan. You can't get around it. If you get the best location in town and have a bad plan, you'll have a bad house. But you can take the second best location in town and have a fabulous plan and without question have a better house.

Again, I say, ranch house makes the plan. With the ranch house you have so much more adaptability. We've done ranch houses now since 1931. Every one we do, we've never had two alike except when someone says, "I want one like this." Which we won't do. The reason we say we won't do it, we can't do it even if we wanted to, is because, number one, the owner never has exactly the same tastes as other people do. There's never been two lots with exactly the same exposure. One will have a different slope to it, one will have a different view, one will have a different wind direction, one will have a different condition, one will have to be graded differently, one will have trees, one will be in the desert. They're never the same.

If you took a plan that somebody did and they said, "This is absolutely perfect, it'll fit me perfectly," I'd point out that that fit the couple that built it perfectly,



at least at the time they built it, and there came a time when it didn't fit them perfectly, and they didn't like it at all. And so here these people say, "This is perfect for me"?

And you say, "Well, maybe we can build you a better one. We can design a better house right now, and we'll make it the way you want it. You won't be paying for things that are in that [earlier] plan that you won't want."

So again, back to the plan.

LASKEY: And, also, I guess what you're saying is that deciding, with the materials and the plan and the site, everyone has got to be considered.

MAY: That's correct.

LASKEY: You go out to the site, I assume?

MAY: Every site we do, we go, yes. Even in foreign countries, it's part of the condition that we go to look at it, because you're flying blind if you don't. You will see things that they won't see. That's my business, and that's what they're hiring me for. Many times we go and help them pick out the site. And many times I've had clients-- I had one just recently, the Rosenweigs from Washington, D.C., about two years ago, called and said they were overlooking the Potomac River, which was just beautiful. And they could hardly wait until I got there, when could I come?





would I come? I would. And we went. We had a lovely luncheon at their club, and we went out to see the site. I looked at it, and I thought, gee, I'd have a hard time building a house on this site. It's beautiful, but it's so steep and there are so many trees and, if I would take the trees out, why, it won't be so beautiful as it is. The Potomac looked beautiful, but yet next door you didn't know what was going to happen because there was no restrictions on the property.

I got back, and I said, "Look, I've come all the way from L.A. to visit with you, and you're going to take me to your beautiful home. I wouldn't trade this home for any I've seen on the Potomac."

And they said, "Oh, but the noise is so loud."

And I said, "What noise?"

And they said, "Well, the freeway."

And so we said, "Well, you can plant that out. This has just happened so slowly that you haven't even got accustomed to it."

To make a long story short, the point was that they agreed that where they were was a lot better. I pointed out the pitfalls on the hillside, and having to take out the trees, and then it would be another ten years to get back to at least as high as they were. It was so steep that they'd need walls. They had a lovely home.



Beautifully furnished. Great taste. So that's why I go, because if I said, "Yes, I can do it," and then look--and I couldn't have done a house. Nobody could have done a house on that site, I don't believe.

The ranch house has surely spread. Going back to San Diego, there was nobody-- Gill wasn't, Frank Lloyd Wright surely wasn't, Schindler wasn't building ranch houses, [Richard] Neutra, who came later, was not.

The nearest thing to it would be the San Diego Exposition. They brought Bertram Goodhue, and he, of course, was a great expert on the Mediterranean. He did one fabulous job. He incidentally was-- Young was associated with Bertram Goodhue, and I have a very wonderful personally published book by George Marston (I've spoken of him several times). George Marston was considered the godfather of the San Diego park system. He was the one who said they had to have parks. He put his own money where his vocal chords were. He made donations, and he donated Presidio Park, the biggest park. He was on the committee that selected the two great Olmstead brothers from Saint Louis, the greatest landscape architects of the time for city planning, to come out and lay out Balboa Park. In his memoirs there was a note about how he was part of the original deal with Bertram Goodhue. Bertram Goodhue went along without him, apparently. I think that Gill did the



Balboa Park bridge. It is very distinctive of Gill's style, tall arches and the symmetry and the way they march right across the canyon. I'm only surmising that he probably got that bridge designed about the time that there was a falling out. I've never seen it anywhere, but I do know from the facts I have read that Gill goes a part. And I see that marked. [thumbs through book] Then I see that he's no longer with Bertram Goodhue but has quit the whole thing.

Another interesting thing I read, and I'll put it down for history, and this is in the book, but you may never come across it, because these are private editions. It happened that the Olmstead brothers had designed the park at the request of Marston and other civic leaders. The Balboa Park was to be the great park in San Diego. I believe it is one of the great parks in the United States. So the design was all laid out by Olmstead and the peripher-ies were all set and the boundaries were all set, and then the exposition was proposed. It was the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 or '15. That's when the exposition was. It was planned by Frank Balcher, a leading citizen, and many other men that my father and I knew as leading citizens as I grew up. Along with Balcher, there was O. W. Cotton, who was a great real estate man down there. They were on the board, and they hired Bertram Goodhue. I think



a citizen at that time was Gill. So that's the way it started.

Along the way the park [board] submitted to Olmstead that Bertram Goodhue wanted to put the exposition right in the center of the park. To which there was a big consternation in the Olmstead brothers' office. They said that nobody was going to take their park and put an exposition in the center of it. That was not where you put parks. You put an exposition on the side of the park. There was a beautiful point, down below the park, where the exposition should go on, to preserve and free up the entire park. So they took that information back to the board, and the board said, "Well, that makes sense." They went back to Goodhue, and Goodhue said it didn't make sense and that he was going to put the exposition where he wanted it, he was the architect, and there's no place like the center of the park, with the park all around it. At which time they then wrote-- The letters are in the book: "Dear Olmsteads, will you please reconsider? You have Mr. Goodhue's assurance that he wants to work with you and have it where it is."

And then the letter from Olmstead: "Knowing what you're doing to the people of San Diego in your own good intentions by putting the exposition in the wrong place, in our professional capacity we can have no part of it. We send hereby our resignation." So they resigned. Oh, they





said, "We will not reconsider, so please do not call us to reconsider."

And then they went ahead and put the [exposition] in the center. And it turned out pretty good, because Goodhue did such a great job and with the bridge going across the center and some of the key buildings as great as they were. They tore down the temporary buildings, and then they rehabilitated others. They were built so well, and the ones they preserved didn't deteriorate because of the mild climate. They rebuilt some of the buildings and renamed them. Now they've got the buildings scattered through the park, which I think is better, but it was the Olmstead brothers' idea that it was all to be torn down, you see. So here we have a landscape architect with a two-legged stool that I told you about, the third leg, well, it worked out.

So, I'm back now to saying the role that the Spanish architecture had. Now, I say in the park you saw it. You saw the Spanish architecture, Mediterranean, arcades, wide porches. You saw botanical gardens, which were a different form of architecture, which went all through the United States at that time and all the world's fairs, the Saint Louis World's Fair and the Chicago. We had a distinctive style. We had old California emerging in this actually native Spanish architecture. Definitely Spanish. There's



nothing ranch house about it anyplace. They built an Indian village; later that became a Boy Scout village.

LASKEY: It's still there, I think.

MAY: I think it's still there. Then some of the buildings that weren't so good they tore down, and they had a committee that rehabilitated them. I think they got WPA help for some. But still, no ranch house as such. So in 1920, '21, '22, there was nobody building ranch houses to my knowledge. I was playing in the orchestra. Did I tell you that in the orchestra I played for [Charles] Lindbergh?

LASKEY: Yes.

MAY: I'll get that in there again. I didn't know who he was.

LASKEY: Didn't know who he was? That's amazing.

MAY: Will Rogers was the master of ceremonies and key speaker.

Anyhow there was no house that I really thought was great, although I liked this Monterey furniture that Barker Brothers was manufacturing. I guess up here there might have been a few ranch houses going. Bill [William W.] Wurster did one up in Paso de Tiempo, which is one of the great ones. And I will tell you a story about that. When we did our first book, I guess it was 1947, I wrote to Mr. Wurster and asked him if we could use photographs of the Paso de Tiempo house. It's in the book, and it's a great



ranch house. It has a tower, board and battens, everything a ranch house is supposed to be in that era. It was differentiated from the hacienda, which is the adobe. We called it rancheria and other people called it ranch house. He didn't call it a ranch house, but it was just a big normal natural house, built of natural materials and redwood. Anyhow, he wrote back and said, "You're very welcome to it, but please do not give me name credit." He did not want to be associated with it.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: Which is amazing because this is one of the best things I think he ever did.

LASKEY: Well, his style changed somewhat after that, and then he became associated with the Bay Area style.

MAY: Yes. He was teaching at Cal [University of California, Berkeley].

Then there were several other people about that time I am talking about. This had to be after the Depression. During the Depression, there were three or four architects, their names escape me now, who were doing very passable ranch houses, some built out of adobe. There were four or five. I can furnish the names to you, but at this moment I just don't recall them. \*[Sam Hammill; Bill Mushet;

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcripts.



Clarence Cullimore; Clarence Tantau; Joseph Plunkett;  
William Bain] In San Diego there was really nobody that  
was doing it. So in '31, I told you about the Depression  
and my getting started, I decided to build my first house.  
I knew what I wanted to do and I drew it on a piece of  
paper and got the permit. It was around the new patio. It  
was my first house.





SEPTEMBER 15, 1982

LASKEY: In talking about your early development of the ranch style house in San Diego, you said you were probably the only architect or designer who built exclusively in the ranch style house, and you've never changed from that style after fifty years.

MAY: Of course, what the ranch house style is it's an easy thing to pin down and nearly everything that is well done could come under the classification if it was a one-story house. In the first book that I did with Sunset magazine we defined what the ranch house was and we kicked it around for a long time. After many photographs and many discussions and seeing many houses and talking about many houses, we came up with the idea that any house that was one-story and lived like a ranch house was a ranch house. The idea being that if it had cross-ventilation and if it had one-story so you could walk out without going down lots of steps to get to the courtyard or patio, or if it had a courtyard or patio or walls protecting it and had privacy, and it was not a box but was stretched out somewhat, it would be a ranch house. If it lives like a ranch house, it is a ranch house.

You can take another house and say, well, you've got four steps to the front door. It's got a porch on the front and you go into the entrance hall and there's a



living room on one side and a dining room on the other side. Behind that are rooms, why, that doesn't live like a ranch house, so it's not a ranch house. It's one of a thousand kinds--well, not a thousand, but, let us say, one of twenty kinds of architecture. It could be a colonial, Spanish, it could be Georgian, it could be just anything, but the ranch house was this informal way of living, the old California way.

And when we discussed the fact that it was native to California, in my travels I've never seen anything else we could call a ranch house. In Australia, I've not seen one. We built one in Australia. In all of my traveling there I didn't see anything else we would call a California ranch house. They had farmhouses, but, the ranches I was on, they were quite traditional, and I guess they had an influence from out of England.

An English country house is nothing like a ranch house, and in the south of France there isn't. There is in Spain, of course, and on the border south of France where you might get a few; but in residential, no. Even the Spanish houses had the courtyards, but they were two-story and they weren't low and spread and rambling.

In the hundreds of books and photographs that I have, there are many, many houses in the foreign countries that are really boxes. They're just boxes, but they do have



courtyards formed by being built against other people's houses. And they do enter into the garden, and they make adaptations of the weather. I guess what does determine pretty much the shape of a house, what kind of a house you have and determines the floor plan, is the climatic condition, if you're sensitive to that. But many people have the climatic condition in Southern California, and then they build to the climate back in, say, Michigan. Many people come out here, and they still want a box with forced hot air, two-story, and many of the amenities and ways of living that they had back in the East.

So back again to the ranch house, it's an informal way of living out of doors. I remember my first contact with Miss Elizabeth Gordon, of House Beautiful. I've talked about her before. She is one of the favorites of everybody in the California architectural profession, because she's done so much to promote and explain the California way of life to the rest of the country through her magazine. When she first came out, she said this was another world. She was born, I believe, in Iowa and she was working in New York City, commuting from New York up to Dobbs Ferry, a beautiful bit of country. They had a beautiful country estate. Her married name was Norcross, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Norcross. He was with the March of Time and a colonel in the United States Air Force under General [Ira C.] Eaker in



England and came back to Time-Life and became one of the editors of House and Home. So it was a great marriage for architecture, both being interested in all kinds of housing, he writing for the Time-Life on House and Home, and she for the Hearst Corporation with House Beautiful. She said many times how much indebted she was to finding California and finding the kind of living out here that she had never dreamed existed.

And I think it all goes back to what we said about the climate dictates housing. Should if you observe it and \*[recognize what can be done in design by working with it, like enclosing the out of doors with the walls of the outside and letting the sun in with skylights, sliding glass doors.] Back East it's not so advantageous except through improvements in housing. Since the advancements in technology, we've all kinds of changed techniques and materials. We have houses back in Kansas City, where I have a picture of the snow all over. We had snow melting in the inner patio. We just melted the snow, and it looked like springtime in the patio, with snow all around. We did the same thing at Lake Tahoe, where Lake Tahoe gives us the contrast with back East with below zero temperatures, and yet the skylights and the snow-- I visited the house one

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





time when the snow was up to your waist almost, and we needed chains to get in. Inside the house the snow had melted back from the skylight and you look out to blue sky and snow all over the roof. They were so proud of the house. The owner said that the thermostat went off during the day because of the tremendous snow load insulation on top, and the solar heat from the sun coming through the snow and the skylight kept them warm.

LASKEY: Sort of a solar insulated installation--

MAY: It wasn't planned or engineered, so how it actually worked I don't know, but it was very warm.

LASKEY: Well, it's sort of interesting, while you were talking-- There was the indigenous architecture, the ranch house, which sort of nothing happened when the Americans developed this area. They moved the eastern architecture here.

MAY: That's where more people came from the East to colonize and did not know what we really had.

LASKEY: Exactly, until you came along almost single-handedly to remove that kind of architecture. And then you moved that ranch style back East.

MAY: Well, that's the way it worked, and, of course I guess we give all the credit probably, or much of it, to Elizabeth Gordon and Carl Norcross. Miss Gordon did a



tremendous amount of publicity on ranch houses, and on mine especially.

I had started in San Diego in '31, and we're researching my records of it now for [University of California] Santa Barbara. Dr. [David] Gebhard, he may be working on the book, but he wanted to know the speed with which the ranch house caught on. At the time I didn't know what I was doing, I was just building houses, the kind of houses I thought they should be, and I didn't even think of them as being ranch houses. We called one a rancheria that had a shingled roof, and in Indian, in Mexican, that means a covered thatch like a ramada (bower). The word rancheria was not really a ranch house but just a word that sounded like ranch house. Then when we had the tile roof, we called it a hacienda, which doesn't mean hacienda, which means a big spread in Spanish, like a big ranch, hacienda. It doesn't mean a house, but we called them haciendas and rancherias and seemed to get away with it.

But going back to Dr. Gebhard and collecting of the historical ranch house information, we started out and the dates which seem familiar, I wouldn't have them, had I not been studying them over the last six or seven months.

The first house I did in San Diego was in 1931, in the middle of the Depression. We've gone over that. But the rate at which they came was sort of phenomenal, because I



started very slowly. Built one, then sold it. Then we built another one and sold it, and then I built mine at the same time. So we got two in one period, and then we sold that and built another one. By that time I was building three, then three went to eight, and pretty soon had five or six going all the time, starting, building, and finishing all over the city and county. So when we got through in five to six years in San Diego, I didn't stop to count at the time, but I had close to fifty houses. In those five or six years to have built around fifty houses, almost a house a month, now seems impossible. \*[But plans were simple, three or four pages vs. thirty-plus now, inspections easy, houses were all cash, so no financing. We worked six days a week and eight to ten hours a day in summer.]

LASKEY: Now these were all custom-made houses, too?

MAY: All custom \*[designed and built by me as contractor. That's another reason we needed so few plans. I also only took one profit, which was small in those depression years, the thirties.] The first ones were slower, because we built one for sale and then you had to sell it and do another one, so it took longer than if you were building

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



for owners. You could build two or three at once that way, because you had no selling to do.

Incidentally, all of my houses were always built for all cash. We never had a loan on a house. I don't think I ever built an FHA [Federal Housing Authority] house in my life, except the Low Cost Houses of 1951-1953. I don't remember building any veterans' houses for veterans' loans.

But the people--we've talked about this I think before--but the people that seemed to like my houses, which I called ranch houses, called California houses, were people who were world travelers. People from the navy and people from the army and wealthy people who had been around the world and had seen other countries seemed to like them better than the provincial people who didn't understand them. Here people lived right in that beautiful weather, but they didn't realize how \*[much more pleasure they would have from a house designed for the specific building site and for California weather.]

So continuing with the thought I had and in answer to your question, the magazines came in spreading the ranch house idea. After I'd done around fifty, most of which had been published in about-- Well, I think that nearly every one of them was in a magazine in some form or other.

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





Sunset magazine used them on their cover and on six or seven feature articles and put little squibs about them from time to time. The third house I did was in American Home, the February 1935 issue, and that had a big national circulation in those days. My house was in California Arts and Architecture, April 1935, which was just here in the West, local subscriptions. \*[Then all the other magazines--Good Housekeeping with Dorothy Draper, the professional magazines, and especially Elizabeth Gordon of House Beautiful published my houses. California Arts and Architecture, at that time, was becoming and became an important magazine in the so-called modern movement.] Magazine after magazine the houses appeared in.

Then when Elizabeth Gordon came, Sunset said they "found me first," and then there may have been a bit of rival jealousy there. They didn't know why I was going with them [House Beautiful] when "they [Sunset] discovered me." I didn't really know what "discovered" meant in those days. I was just busy building houses. Finally, Miss Gordon really went to town on my houses. My own house must have been featured in eight or ten different issues, and two issues were big, big issues about the house. The first being her idea about "Meeting A Family Who Really Knows How

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



To Live," and then showed all the things we did that the average person didn't do or even knew about--like walk-in cold room and walk-in freezer. We had the first gas dryer that had come out, experimental, and we had a lot of "first" things in that house. My business was trying out these new ideas before trying them out on clients.

LASKEY: Now this was your first--

MAY: Third house built for my family, and the second family house in Los Angeles. The second house was built in Mandeville Canyon in West Los Angeles in 1935-36, when we moved to Los Angeles. That was where I met Miss Elizabeth Gordon, in the third house, you see. And she showed pictures of how we had can closets that opened, and the cans were on the doors and the cans were inside. The can closet was a spice closet with all the spices you can buy and then you dump it into your own cans. One picture was a novel idea; we had the first home incinerator that you could incinerate wet material in. It didn't do very well, but the idea was that you could throw in your garbage and it dried it out and it reduced down to about the size of a walnut. And you could load and load and load, but it \*[didn't dry the garbage. So we put a sack of walnuts in

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



it and the house caught on fire--that's an example of why I always tried new ideas on myself.]

The thing I always tried, was \*[new ideas for living and holding to the time proven ideas of patios, low rambling structures, and simplicity, and space.] And that was while raising the children.

We had the first residential intercoms. One man had started making intercoms in '38 or 1939. We just opened a cabinet we had at the head of the bed, and we listened to the children in their different rooms. It was really quite unusual. We had a microphone at the dining room table. It makes a lot of sense because of the household help. Formerly when you wanted something, you used to ring a buzzer, then she'd hear the buzzer and come into the dining room and say, "What is it?" And you'd whisper you needed a fork or you wanted her to clear the dishes. With the microphone you just pushed it down and said, "The dishes please" or whatever it was. And she knew it was time to come. It really saved time. So it was great. But that was no big deal.

We had the horses under the same roof so that in the wintertime, in the rain or any bad weather we had, you could feed the horses without going out with slickers and

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



boots on. And we built a four-car garage so we had a place for the kids to play on rainy days without tearing the house apart.

LASKEY: A four-car garage in 1938? That must have been quite unique!

MAY: It was, but I wanted to build a little ahead of what was going to be coming. I'll get into that. When it really came we were so far ahead in living ideas that nobody liked it, but only because they didn't comprehend. Now it's here.

But we had a little tack and buggy room and we had \*[a three-stall stable and paddock which connected to the bridle trails and in the Santa Monica Mountains next door and Riviera Country Club and polo fields across Sunset Boulevard with its horse underpass.] We had a paddle tennis court before it became the thing to do. Now it's tennis. But paddle tennis, in those days you could get a court on and you didn't have to spoil the whole lot.

In our bathrooms we had the first bidet. I had built a house for a French couple, and they taught me what a bidet was. So our house had the first bidet. It had a lot of "firsts," not because we were trying to be first, but I was just anxious to see what's new and how it would work.

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





We'd get it, and so it turns out to be first. But nobody knew what a bidet was. It has a spout in the center that has a right and left lever, and if you turn it the right way it doesn't use the spout, and if you turn it the left way it spouts so hard it hits the ceiling. [laughter]

We'd have parties, and this house was a well-built house, but in '39 we didn't even think of a powder room. We should have, but we didn't. So we'd use the master bath which had double baths, a Mr. bath and a Mrs. bath. The women would go into the bidet, usually they'd go in pairs, and, I guess, they'd say, "What is this?" They'd lean over and turn the water on and, if the spout was right, they'd get a big splash in the face. It was so bad that when they came out you knew they had been soaked. [laughter]

LASKEY: Oh, my!

MAY: Then we got around it by saying to watch out for it, then they got [soaked] more than ever. But since that time I've never built a fine home without a bidet. And we use now two bidets, one for Mr. and one for Mrs. It's really a great habit.

LASKEY: Really!

MAY: The French use it, of course. They use it, the book says, to wash their private parts. And that's why you hear about the "French and the English bathing only once a week." And that's a true story. I have a friend who built



a big chain of motels, and he was asked to do some over in England. That's the chain that has a little bear in a nightshirt going up a flight of stairs, I can't think of the name--

LASKEY: Oh, TraveLodge.

MAY: TraveLodge. He was a friend from San Diego, and he founded it. Scott King his name was. He went over to the "consortium," or whatever they call it to make a presentation to build a chain of them in England. When he got there why he brought a plan and they saw it. They said, "What are these?"

He said, "These are bathrooms."

They said, "You mean in each room there is a bathroom? We don't do that here. We have a nice bathroom at the end of the hall." I think with that Scott gave up. But that's not a joke, but I guess that's all changed now.

At the time we were building, a bathroom was an expensive area and still is. Many houses had one bathroom for the three bedrooms. When it got to the time of Wallace Neff, why, he built a very, very expensive house and then usually had a bathroom for two guestrooms to share, and then it became really deluxe when they had a Mr. and Mrs. bath. A lot of people still don't include double baths, but we hardly ever do a house without them. I'm talking



about ranch houses now, but this applies to any kind of a house.

The thing about the ranch house, in spreading it out, it does cost a little more to do. So that's why it maybe became known as more of an expensive house to build than, let's say, a conventional square house with four corners. In a ranch house we have more windows because we have them on both sides of the room. We have more rafter overhang, more outside plaster. The plumbing has to run longer distances. The wiring has to go longer distances; the voltage drops, which is easy to take care of. Then there's more rafters to cut. In a square house you'd cut, say, sixteen rafters on each side, and you are finished. On a ranch house you could have sixteen rafters just on one room. So the cost was a factor.

LASKEY: But doesn't it also make it better constructed?

MAY: Oh yes. But it could be the same construction. You could have a badly built ranch house and a fine built conventional house, or vice versa. But there's just more work, more things to do. But it's like anything. The more expensive yacht, if you can afford a yacht, has better equipment than a tugboat or a rowboat. It's just a matter of question. The reason I probably had the no-loan houses was because they were a little more expensive houses to do, and they were attractive to an income bracket that they



were able to afford to build a house without having to place a mortgage on it.

LASKEY: Well, it's interesting because you have built both obviously the very nice, the very big, and very expensive custom houses and then also you've gotten involved in low-cost housing.

MAY: That's right. There's two factors in it. One, we did build small ranch houses, just as well as we could build them. Like my first house, it had a small two-car garage, a little passageway you entered into the patio, and it had a kitchen, a little breakfast nook, and a dining room, and then a little living room. I remember thirteen-by-twenty was the size of it, and [it had] a ten-by-twelve bedroom, and the master bedroom was twelve-by-fourteen, and a fireplace in the living room in the corner, which gave a little more space but made it harder to furnish.

So we built many, many of our houses. The little ones we could build in ninety days. We didn't need much in the way of drawings, because there was nothing complicated. In fact, all my houses were under \$10-12,000, which would be times twenty now, it would be \$20,000. In other words, I would say I built as many houses under \$100,000 over my lifetime as I did over \$100,000, when you take in the Depression years.





LASKEY: But I was going to say, isn't it a little hard to equate the values because--

MAY: You can do it an easier way by saying this, first of all, the houses in the twenties were small and, in the thirties, they were even a little smaller, because the Depression was on then and people had houses with less space. Then, in the thirties, they started to get a little bit bigger, and, in the early forties, we went to war and they stopped building. Then after the war, the boom was on and people started building larger houses, and we began having two and three cars in the garage. In the twenties, you only had one car in the garage, and, in the thirties, you had two cars, but the house was smaller.

I'm trying to relate the size of the houses with the cost per square foot. When I started you could build for \$2.50 per square foot in 1931--\$2.50. Then it went up to \$3, and then \$3.25 and then \$3.50, then \$4. When I came to L.A. it was about \$4. That would be 1935. It stayed at \$4 until the war started. After the war, it started to creep up to \$5. For a while, we were on \$6 and \$7, and then there were \$8, then it hit \$10, and then we were \$12, \$12.50 we did a house per square foot. Then all of a sudden as labor unions came and as there was a greater selection of building materials [which] got more expensive and also people began demanding bigger houses and more



things in the houses-- In the first houses we built, we didn't include equipment. For \$12.50 a square foot, the owner bought the stove, the refrigerator, and now that's all built in, and it's part of the cost per square foot. Also, you can finance appliances, which you couldn't in the old days. When you built the old house and you had a mortgage on it, you had to pay cash for your stove and refrigerator. So with all of those and many [other] factors added together, the whole sum total of it is that the price has been going up slowly but steadily since 1931. And its price curve has been going up like, as Brendan Gill of the New Yorker magazine said, "as the profile of the Eiffel Tower." It starts out real flat, then it starts getting steeper and steeper, as you get up to the top and in 1982 we haven't reached it.

LASKEY: It spirals.

MAY: And our houses have gone from the \$2.50 a [square] foot to where we are at, one house only, a \$180 a square foot. But \$180 a square foot is like comparing a Model T Ford with a computerized new Cadillac.

LASKEY: A hundred and eighty dollars?

MAY: That's per square foot. But that's with antique doors, with hand-carved corbels and decorative items built in, and with radiant heating, with heat pumps (water-well extraction through a heat pump), for both heating and



cooling, putting water back in the earth, water system of filtration, and handmade custom floortile, and imported marble materials \*[double glazing, skylights, garden lights, soundproof design, and central controlled lighting, et cetera.] That's an expensive house.

But the average house right now is being built for a about \$100 a [square] foot. There are houses that have been built-- There's no use talking about it, but when these Arabs come and build houses some cost \$1,000 a square foot. But the whole story again is that the ranch house is slightly more to build because it has more in it, more overhangs, as I said, and more roof and more spread, but it offers more.

So going back to Miss Elizabeth Gordon. She publicized my second Los Angeles house in 1942, and we got a tremendous amount of inquiry on it. She got good press, and they did other articles. They had commissioned Maynard Parker, who was one of the great architectural photographers of the time out there, and he became their exclusive photographer. He would find houses for them. He had good taste, and he showed Miss Gordon more than my share of houses for her to choose from. Out of that came the spread back East. I did my first book with Sunset magazine. It

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed material during his review of the tape transcript.



was called Western Ranch Houses by Sunset magazine in collaboration with Cliff May.

[As] I look back now at an old copy, I was just on the paper cover, and when the paper dust jacket fell off I wasn't in the book. [laughter] But I did all the work putting it together. In those days there were some ranch houses we could not get good pictures of. I think it was about '47, and the ranch house popularity was just a building then, and there was no place where you could come in and say, "Here's a fine ranch house," with photographs showing foliage and gardens and patios. So I gathered what ranch house photos I could find, and they would be overgrown with plants and couldn't really see the building behind the shrubbery. So we hired Frank Jamison, who was one of the fine architectural delineators of our time, and he would remove the shrubbery and make sketches of the building, and we were then able to show the ranch house properly. Out of the hundreds of photographs we were able to collect of ranch houses the majority of the book was, as I recall, all sketches-- There were a few pages where the book shows "The Camera Examines The Ranch House." And we had a few fine photographs including Bill Wurster's wonderful ranch house at Santa Cruz. The book was a big seller, over 50,000 copies, and they would print edition after edition. The book came out I think in about '46 or '47.





With the coming of World War II, I was unable to build because all luxury construction was shut down by the government, but any job that was under construction received priority to continue. So I did have about two or three jobs. One of the best jobs I ever did was under construction--we'll talk about that someday--it's the F. M. Blow, the Frederic Blow house on a wooded mountain top in Brentwood on Oakmont Drive.

LASKEY: We've discussed that.

MAY: We did. The UCLA critics say that it's one of my best, but they call my fifth residence, Mandalay, my masterpiece. We continued to finish the Blow house. The book in the meantime was being put together.

I was champing at the bit, not being able to create anything new, so I decided to design a house I would build as soon as the war was over. It was quite an advance over anything I had done. It featured a courtyard with sky shades (we coined the word "sky shades"), which were big silken shades, like they use in Spain, only they made theirs out of burlap. They'd pull them across on rollers so you could control the sun in the courtyard. The magazine that later published the house after it had been built called them "wind shutters," but they were big louvers that lifted up or could be closed to stop the wind. They opened up into a second patio with an enclosed walled-in swimming



pool. And the kitchen opened into the barbecue and the outdoors, so you could take everything from the kitchen right to the barbecue without going through the house with it or going out the back porch, which most people have to do. Or pass it out the kitchen window, which was worse.

LASKEY: Right!

MAY: The sketches and my drawings were made, and then we got the idea in the book, well, let's end the book with this house. This is the way that things will be after-- Cliff May's ranch house thinking after the war, or something like that. So it was the last five or six pages in the book, and we had these wonderful Jamison sketches of it. And it described what I was going to do.

Well, the war was over, and the building business started to pick up. It took a while to get organized and started but residential home building was improving. They had been building lots and lots of war-worker houses, and now, they converted to veterans' houses. The Veterans Administration had loans for them. FHA was created prior to the war, of course, and now they were working to make loans for the flood of people who wanted to build. FHA was for everybody. The Vets [VA] was a better deal but only for veterans. \*[The ranch house style and California

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcripts.



weather had been seen by millions of the "flying men" from the East, South, and Midwest. It gave them ideas of a new way of life. It was another plus for the ranch house and sparked its spread eastward.]

I approached Sunset--for whom I'd built the Sunset Magazine Building; at that time the Sunset Book Building had not yet been built--and suggested they should be the ones to sponsor building Ranch Book's "Cliff May After The War House." I would build it on one of our key sites in the Riviera Ranch, which is the subdivision Mr. Smith financially made possible. We've talked about where all the houses are designed by me and built by me or we wouldn't sell the land to you. They said that publishing was their business and not building houses. They welcomed me to get anybody else who would do it.

Well, House Beautiful just grabbed it, and having the ball, they really ran. In fact, I had the house under construction when they saw it and said, "Let's go." Then they took it over, and Elizabeth Gordon with her tremendous dynamic personality [that] could convince anybody of anything, and her whole magazine staff, headed by Mrs. Frances Hearst, set out to convince the world that this is the way to live in California. In doing so, Miss Gordon convinced her publisher, Mr. Richard Hoefer, that this should be the first [issue of the magazine] ever published



that was all color and only one house exclusively. There would be no black-and-white pictures of the house and there would be nothing in the magazine except this house, its furnishings, and landscaping. It would be on the cover \*[and would be called the Pacesetter House, and the first of a series of Pacesetter Houses to be built throughout the U.S.] It would be furnished by all the big advertisers who would get priority to put their materials into the house. So she had these [advertisers]-- Celanese beg[ged] to have their draperies included, and we had Mr. Edward Wormley, the great furniture designer, designing the furniture for Dunbar in the living room, and we had Heeramanic of New York City lending us pre-Columbian art to feature the trend. Miss Gordon wanted to combine the old feeling with contemporary in the Dunbar furniture. Paul Frankl came in to do some of the interiors for us and had wonderful advice on how to bring indoors outdoors. And everybody and his friend, if qualified, was in on the act.

Prior to the publishing, we had three great parties. I remember Miss Gordon wanted to find out what the best California champagne was at that time, because nothing was good enough for House Beautiful's party. Korbel was chosen.

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





House Beautiful and the staff had three great parties. The first night was for the press. It was a wild party, well, not wild but everybody really was singing and having a wonderful time. I had just gone on a diet. They said I couldn't have anything to drink for thirty days, and I was taking some tests, so I was cold sober and these people seemed awfully happy and noisy. [laughter]

The next night was for the people that worked and contributed to the project, and the architects, all the architects, all the architects around. Famous architects from San Francisco came down, and I remember one of the great ones from Chicago, Elizabeth's friend and favorite architect; his name was Samuel Marx. He came all the way out from Chicago. Of course, Dunbar sent their people out, and Ed Wormley was here. Robjohns Gibbings came. All of the people interested in furnishings and interiors were present at this wonderful second night.

And then the third night was the night for the first ladies of Los Angeles and socialites, that's what I'm trying to say; corporation executives and their wives and on and on. One was business, one was fun, and one was social.

As a result, we had a tremendous amount of people wanting to go through it, so we opened the house to inspection with the proceeds to go to charity. I don't remember



the charity we had, but they sent their young ladies out and would take people through. It was open daily. It was for sale. We had a pretty high price on it, because we put a tremendous amount of experimental work in it. \*[It was a new era in postwar luxury housing--one of a kind.] A couple, Mr. and Mrs. Neil Monroe came. He was the RIT dye [Putnam Dye Works]-- It was the RIT dye that was the big dye company in those days.

LASKEY: It still is.

MAY: It used to be in the Middle West. They lived in one of my houses in Riviera Ranch, but one day they came over and took one look at it and said they'd buy it. And did. We kept it open another ten days or two weeks, and then they moved in. They bought all the furniture, too.

The House Beautiful staff and executives who executed the project were such wonderful and nice people. All the invitations that went out, they were all engraved. And the parties were as beautiful as could be done--done so beautifully.

I'll never forget one thing though, about how observing and practical Miss Gordon was. She said we'd have no smoking in the house because these aren't all our furnishings, and we don't want anybody smoking in the house. "Get

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



a great big handsome tub if you can, a big copper tub, and we'll fill it full of pure white sand." Then they put up a sign that said, "No Smoking In The Pacesetter House, Please"--tastefully done. And she said, "Now watch, this whole tub will fill up with just-lighted cigarettes. Whenever anybody comes to see something, believe it or not, especially smokers are nervous and unsure of themselves and as they walk across the motorcourt to the front door, they will light a cigarette, and when they see the sign they'll put it out, watch." And I was amazed to see all the cigarettes that were just lighted before they came in.

The House Beautiful Pacesetter House brought a tremendous amount of recognition and business for me and spread the ranch house idea across the nation. I finally figured I built probably nine derivatives of the house. I never built two alike. We couldn't anyhow, because, as I've explained, the sites are never the same and families are never the same and they all want to make a change.

LASKEY: Were they mostly in Southern California?

MAY: No, no, that's it, they were all away from Southern California. I think of one being way back in Ohio, and there was one in Knoxville. We did one in Bartlesville [Oklahoma] for the chairman of the board of Phillips Petroleum, Mr. and Mrs. K. S. "Boots" Adams.

LASKEY: That's a phenomenal house.



MAY: We did one in Texas. We did one up in Wyoming-- No, Pendleton, Oregon is where the annual rodeo is. And we did one I believe in San Diego, and we did one in New Orleans that never got out of the ground because Mr. Joe W. Brown died before we got the foundations in, and so they were never able to finish it.

Then we also did something else. Elizabeth Gordon had this terrific idea; she included in the back of the article a "Pacesetter House For All Climates." And she showed how it could be built in cold climates and how it could be done in super-hot climates. Then she had another "Pacesetter House For Limited Budgets." I'll never forget, we built the house right next door, a Pacesetter House built on a limited budget, so we had two side by side. And that was for a friend, his name was Austin Peterson. He was the producer for the You Asked For It television show. Then he retired to Honolulu and [the show] started up again, but it didn't go very well. He had to come back and straighten the new company out. He licensed them, so, he's back on the credits again. But I think he likes Honolulu better than Los Angeles because he's still there.

The House Beautiful publicity, though, kept going. Before House Beautiful's opening, they had prephotographed





it, \*[hundreds of color photographs were taken by Maynard Parker, the famous architectural photographer.] Then a big issue came out, and for the fourth time I had my name on the cover of a national magazine. It had "House Beautiful's Pacesetter House by Cliff May," that was the cover shot, which I'm very proud of.

LASKEY: That certainly had to have been a pivotal point in your career.

MAY: I guess it was, because I am told, over a million people had seen it. We got letters from all over, and at that time they asked me to be on the staff of House Beautiful magazine as consultant, the construction consultant. So I was on the masthead for several years, I don't remember how long.

But I do remember I would do things like, well, people would write in and say "Our shingles leak when we've got ice from snow on the roof, what's the trouble?" So I would write the solution was put a string of electric heat cable under the eavshingles and it will melt the ice down, which will allow the roof to drain and not back up and leak.

LASKEY: Well, that must date the beginning of the spread of the ranch-style house across the country.

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



MAY: That's right. That was when the public started to wake up to the possibilities of the ranch house style. In '47 it was published. In '48, '49, and '50 we were deluged with as many as we could build, more than our share. In the meantime, one thing I didn't say is that when I left San Diego in '35--I think I told you this story about Mr. [J. A.] Smith suggesting that I come to L.A. and advising me that it would be a better future for me.

LASKEY: Yes.

MAY: And when I left San Diego, there were about four builders that knew I had a good thing and they all started copying it my houses. Instead of coming up with their own style of outdoor living, they just copied down to a T, so much so that I still get letters from people saying, "I bought a Cliff May house, will you verify it? I'm told it's a Cliff May house."

So I have to write and tell them, "It sounds like it." Or I get the address and then I say, "It's a Cliff May-inspired house."

LASKEY: But it wasn't a Cliff May house.

MAY: One was an architect and he still insisted that it was, so I finally went down one day and saw it, but it wasn't. But he was so sure and he measured it. [I said] "I can't see why you'd bother about one of my houses because you could build one of your own."



He said, "I'd rather live in one of yours."

[laughter] And he was disappointed it wasn't one.

About that time the magazine, House and Home picked it up. Oh, that's another story, which I'll come to, but Sunset and House and Home and others ran page after page, describing ranch house living, with many of our houses on their covers. In fact, we even came out with a house, we called it the "Magazine Cover House," one of those low-cost houses. We had a tremendous amount of publicity. My last house for my family, CM No. 5, was in the process of being planned during the "Pacesetter House" building and showing.

LASKEY: Now which house is this?

MAY: The house, CM No. 5, now called Mandalay. You've seen that, haven't you?

LASKEY: No, I haven't but--

MAY: Oh, you must see it then. Why don't you come on Monday? Jody Greenwald from UCLA is having a class house tour.

LASKEY: I work, so I can't, but thank you.

MAY: OK. We're going to see that and the one-- You ought to take a day off from work, and we'll go up to what some have called the masterpiece, the Zubin Mehta house, which was the Blow house.



I worked design for a long time on CM House No. 5, Mandalay, having lived for twenty years in what I called the No. 1, 2, 3, and 4 houses. The one that Elizabeth Gordon started off with, No. 3, was built in '38, '39, which was way before the Pacesetter House. For CM No. 5, when the designs were completed and the job started, I went back to New York to talk about House Beautiful publishing the No. 5 house. But when Elizabeth Gordon found out how big the living room was, thirty feet wide and fifty feet long, she said that House Beautiful wouldn't be interested at all because it was just too big for their readers.

I said, "Elizabeth, you say that's what has been wrong with houses--the living rooms are too tight, too little. And Frank Lloyd Wright always says, 'Get them bigger, get them bigger. You're building lots of little houses; you ought to be building bigger and better houses.'" \* [I reminded her of her speech to the Los Angeles chapter of the Building Contractors Association at the Los Angeles Ambassador hotel in 1943, "You builders must stop building the nasty little houses you have been building."] But to no avail.

I was terribly disappointed after our long and wonderful association. I came home and went straight to the

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





great Paul C. Frankl, who was, as I've said, my personal friend; our families were very close. When I told him that the House Beautiful [people] said it's too big, he looked at the floor plan and looked at it again. And he said, "Hummph, Cliff, you'll see the day when it isn't big enough. Can you make it any bigger now?"

I said, "No, because I've got the foundations all poured and the plumbing all in."

He says, "Well, there must be someplace where it needs enlarging. I'll help."

I said, "Well, I could push the front porch out, which will enlarge the entry."

[He said,] "Well, do it then. And how about widening the south end at the living room?"

So I pushed out the living room about eight feet, which made an alcove in the living room, without which the house would have been a bust. It just made the living room by making the room wider on the south view end.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: It taught me something. No room should be a rectangle. If it can it should have angles or twists or an around-the-corner look. Frankl said he didn't think the rooms were big enough to be in scale with the fifty-five acre setting and site. And, believe me, since that day we've made thirteen additions to the size of the house.



We've increased the area thirteen times, \*[and the living room is still too tight. I have to move the chimney nine feet out and extend the living room ten feet for what I would now call perfection. The three-car carport needs three more spaces.] I'm going to put another three on. Now, I've got two cars that are outside, old cars that I want to keep. Now the maid comes and leaves her old car parked out front all day long and wrecks the appearance of the house. So if we can get rid of her car in the new carport, it would look better. So, now we need another three-car garage or carport. [laughter] That's the truth, it's no joke. I've got the plans right here on slides, that's one of the slide shows. Paul T. Frankl was right thirty years ago.

LASKEY: Oh, I've seen many, many pictures of Mandalay--

MAY: Well, I have the original 1951-52 plan and then each new addition added with a red line and docked in red.

LASKEY: --and then the additions to it. Well, that's part of what you were talking about the last time we talked was the importance of the plan in any house that you design.

MAY: That's right. That's what I was going to tell you a little later on now.

The next thing was that the editor of House and Garden, Harriet Burket, saw Mandalay and said, "Gee, that's

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



exactly what we want. We'll do a new series and we'll call this the first of the--" They called it the "Hallmark House." \*[It was published in the February issue, 1957, was listed on the cover, and nineteen full pages were used to describe what we now call Mandalay.] They gave me the House and Garden Hallmark House award for the first Hallmark House. Mandalay was followed by a series of Hallmark Houses. And they did the same thing that House Beautiful did with my first Pacesetter House. They did an exclusively Mandalay issue. And it was great publicity. \*[And again as House Beautiful had done, they spread "Ranch House" across the nation and even to Europe in the French edition of House and Garden.]

House and Home was showing a lot of my work, and that was going to the builders, and the builders were being affected in their work by what was selling in California, the ranch house. And in the meantime, Chris [Christian] Choate and I had in the early fifties decided-- He had been doing my sketches, my color paintings, for the clients.

LASKEY: How did you happen to meet Chris Choate?

MAY: I heard that he was one of the best architectural watercolor artists here on the Coast--and I guess that goes for the East, too. He's one of the tops nationwide, all

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



over. He works for the studios and has this great skill of being able to complete a drawing in an evening. Next morning, you have the drawing. So he started doing my work, and he must have done fifty or sixty houses for me all in color. Most of the paintings I gave to USC; they wanted them because he was a graduate and they wanted to use his work in illustrating classes at USC school of architecture.

LASKEY: But he was an architect?

MAY: He was an architect, yes. He didn't have a big practice. He loved to be painting for other architects, and he lived in his self-designed house, the only house I ever built not designed by me. I don't think he made his living completely from architecture. He also taught at UCLA. Well, anyway, we hit it off.

One day we were talking about low-cost houses, just kicking things around. He was very philosophical and very down-to-earth and practical in many ways, and he could always get to the bottom of a question. [He said] "Well, the first thing you want to do, if you want to build a house and have only a little money is put up a wall, a front wall, and you could hide behind it and they couldn't see you." [laughter]

LASKEY: That's a good idea.





MAY: "Then," he says, "if you've got enough money, you put up another wall and make an L, so it wouldn't blow down in the wind. And then, as your money comes in, you do it two more times and you get four walls, and then at least it protects you from the wind. Next thing, you put some burlap over half of it, so you have part in the shade and part in the sun."

Anyway it went on like that, and then I came up with this one: in one corner you just put glass shower doors for the other two sides and make a bathroom. Shower doors are the cheapest thing you can buy to enclose space. And then we decided we'd put two of them in, two corners made out of glass shower doors. We got the roof on, and that's all there was. Floor, walls, and the roof, and then the bathroom. We had to have a kitchen. That was just one piece of plumbing. So we put in a half wall and put the plumbing in that, you could see over the top of it. Before you knew it, we had a great house with only one set of rafters, and corners made out of glass, with no partitions inside. We made wardrobe closets on wheels, and they were two feet by four feet, six feet high. They had concealed rubber-tire rollers, and you pushed them wherever you wanted to. So you could make rooms out of the cabinets, and when you leave--

LASKEY: Great idea!



MAY: So the cabinets were personal property. If you sold your house, you could take your closets with you. That's all there was. We got this, and so I decided, "I'll build it, and I'll move into it to try it out." So I built it.

I had three children and a little Japanese housekeeper enclosed in 1,600 square feet. We had it so that the living room had a sofa and it had beds that looked like sofas, like what they later did in motels [but] we got there first. I think we had a beautiful headboard, and beds came off at right angles, twin beds, and we had those built-in so there would be no dirt under them. They just sat on plywood on rollers, so there was no dirt and you never had to clean under them. All of these things we tried to make it easier for cleaning.

Then we put radiant heat over the whole floor; so no matter where you put your movable closets, why, you were warm because the heat was in the floor. You couldn't do this with hot air, you see.

Then we did lighting with lights all around the edge and wherever you needed them on the purlin beam the length of the room. We had floor plugs in a few key places where you had planters and where you could put lamps. We had a hanging light for over the dining room table.

Then we had a big twelve foot, six inch, Frankl dining room table, and here's a 1,600 foot house, which is one



third more the size of a tract house. They were approximately 1,200 square feet. So we had the size of a two-car garage added to a tract house, that's the size we were. We could seat ten comfortably for dinner, if you pushed the movable partitions back, and twelve if required.

LASKEY: Did you ever build any more of those?

MAY: Strangest thing in the world. There was tremendous publicity. Pageant magazine called it the house with the hole in the roof, and two or three magazines ran it, including Popular Mechanics, in three foreign editions. House and Home ran it and ran it and ran it. Nobody could understand it. And it was so big for such a little house that people just couldn't believe it. A long time ago, though, I discovered people can't judge any better than they know, especially in housing.

One night, Carl Norcross, who's Elizabeth Gordon's husband, came out to Los Angeles, to spend the night. He was with House and Home. I was baching there. We had a couple of drinks and later said he wanted to get to bed.

He said, "Where do I sleep? Which room?"

I said, "Well, how big a room would you like to sleep in?"

He said, "'I'll take the biggest one you've got."



So we had a few more drinks, then pushed all the partitions back, and we made a room that was 25-by-20. And I said that's the biggest room for a 1,600 foot house.

I couldn't sell it to anybody. My children built houses, and they didn't want to have any part of it. There were a lot of mistakes that I made that I know how to correct now. The noise was-- It should have been low piped music coming out of every wall at every point so the background music would take over.

LASKEY: What I think is interesting is that the idea of that developed. Office space eventually became like that.

MAY: Well, now it's back. I've got three people who I'm designing houses for who want one great big room. In fact, Bea Arthur last night, we were out to dinner, she said, "I've got an idea, I want you to make one house with one great big room and nothing else in it." Everybody's going that way. So we're coming out in my new book with-- I just got an article from one of my clients. He started building a year ago, drawing the plans, but he hasn't been able to sell his house so we've just been working slowly. I told him, "What you want is one great room, like mine, a great big one. Big fireplace and terrace and a spacious living room, the greatest luxury a family can have--space!"





TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

SEPTEMBER 15, 1982

MAY: You see, this was done in 1950, when we lived in this house. In '51-52 I built our present house with three rooms, which was way ahead of its time. Now I get more calls from people who have had a big house, and they say, "Mr. May, I want one great big wonderful room like you have and then a nice, luxurious bedroom suite, and that's all I want. We don't mind if we eat in a corner or niche of the living room. We've seen yours and we like that."

All of a sudden I started analysing what I have, and I have about 9,000 feet at my house, Mandalay. We have a great big living room that we've enlarged twice, once when Frankl, seeing the proposed plan, said, "Enlarge it," and then again when we added the dining room. And, still I'd like to push it out again in one or two more places. So I know the size they'd like to have. We have that and a wonderful kitchen that ties into the dining area we added, a master bedroom with two luxurious bath and dressing rooms for Mrs. May and for me. Period. That's all we need. We've got two bedrooms and another bath and her office and a maid or housekeeper's room and a bath and a laundry, a playroom and a poolroom, and my music room, of course, I need, and an entrance hall. We could do without all of the last ones, I said, except the music room, which is just an alcove off of the twenty-by-twenty entrance. We're



literally living in what everybody's asking for: one tremendous room with everything in it, an alcove for music or for books and a place for game playing or bridge or whatever, a big sitting group around a huge friendly fireplace, and a dining room tucked around the corner and a functional kitchen, very luxurious master bathrooms and dressing rooms, that's all you need.

And you're up in the million-dollar class, because of space, and yet you are paying half the price or less. So nearly every client with whom I have talked recently has said, "That's what we want." So we have quite a few jobs under way with this new but old idea.

Now I've a better idea on that. We'll make that for a young couple with the great living room, and when the time comes we'll have planned it--if they can get the land, that's the problem, if they can get the land--if they can, they will add on a wing for the first child. Which is what we did with Mr. and Mrs. Bill [Lawrence William] Lane [Jr.], chairman of Sunset magazine. For the next child, we added another preplanned wing. Bill then said he could afford the garage and we put that on. He owns Sunset magazine now, he and his brother--Mr. and Mrs. Lane, Sr., who founded Sunset have passed away--and now he can afford what he wants. But we kept adding and adding as his income



increased and the magazine went up in the world, and as he needed more space--the growing house, preplanned.

He never would have been able to do it all at once. So he put his money in the location for his family to live, the one thing that most people weren't smart enough to do, he bought location. But had he bought a house, he would have then had to compromise the location to get all the rooms he did not need at that time. There were no children. So we have this one great living room--original structure, it was a great living room--and a kitchen and a spacious master bedroom. So there you have the idea right there when he added on. He built it in Westridge, which is horse country. He's right near the Sunset Magazine Building, within a stone's throw of the office. If he'd gone out where he could have afforded it, house and lot, he would have been blocked in now with the traffic.

LASKEY: So you were just about thirty years ahead of your time when you developed it.

MAY: On that one we were. The fact is that it was an experiment. We just tried things out. We'd try to keep ahead of everybody. Everybody thinks they're ahead of everybody, but we've had a wonderful time trying out things. Being ahead, you know, isn't always the greatest thing. Sometimes you are ahead and it is wrong, or you are right too soon.



LASKEY: That has to be worked out.

MAY: Yes, a lot of times you can be right too soon.

That's what happened to me on the low-cost house. We were talking about that, Chris Choate and his wonderful ideas. Out of this idea of just playing around with one wall, two, three, then four walls, then a roof, we got what we called the Skylight House. In addition to that, I didn't tell you that we had the skylight so that it opened and closed by a motor. It was so complicated that we had to have an airplane rigger rig them so they wouldn't rack when they opened.

We could push a button and the practically the whole roof would open up. You'd look up at the sky and the flies would come sailing in and the leaves would fall off the sycamore trees and land in the living room and you'd have to pick up the leaves. One night we forgot to close it, and we were out in Pasadena. The storms come from the west, and all of a sudden it started raining in Pasadena. We said, "Oh! great! What's going to happen to the house?" We went racing home and found the skylight open and the nylon skyshades pulled across. The skyshades were nylon; full of water. So I was able to get some buckets and poke a hole in the fabric and drain it in these buckets. The floor was an experimental wood floor (later changed to old





tile), which was stupid, too. But that's the way you learn.

Anyhow, the Skylight House was then sold to a very charming lovely woman, you probably know her, Newby Foster of Foster's in Westwood.

LASKEY: Oh, yes.

MAY: And she has impeccable taste. She furnished it with the most beautiful pieces. A year later, she said, "I have the absolute perfect place for all the movable cabinets, so I'm going to give you three of them I don't need. I'm going to fasten down the ones I need and put in real furniture cabinets to replace the three."

So she froze the location of the cabinets which were the room dividers. Now the floor plan is not flexible. She wants it the way it is. She's lived in that house now since 1953 and knows how the adjustable floor plan suits her best.

LASKEY: Where was this?

MAY: It's in my development Sullivan Canyon Ranches, on Old Ranch Road.

LASKEY: In Mandeville.

MAY: Sullivan [Canyon], west of Mandeville.

LASKEY: Sullivan Canyon.

MAY: Yes. And she loves it. I talk to her often. When she has a problem she calls, which is natural, and I help



her. She says she never really will change--a perfect house. When I had it, it was a perfect house for us, experimenting. It didn't cost anything to build, and we were there with three children and a housekeeper, and there never was an unpleasant day. It's like anything new, people take a while to catch on. People wouldn't use dishwashers for a long, long time.

LASKEY: Well, they have to see someone else do it. It was like your spreading of the ranch house when these obviously influential people in various parts of the country did this thing, and that was new and then other people would look at it. Obviously, it's taken thirty years for people to come to the idea of one space and a functional kind of this-is-all-we-need.

MAY: We've had a lot of people copy our houses. I spoke about the house in San Diego. We got into copyright one day. I decided that it was like an artist who would paint a beautiful picture and somebody would take it and make a lithograph of it and sell lithographs and the poor artist would sit there and starve. We always say, "the starving artist," you know. It shouldn't be that way. Victor Herbert in music said he could copyright a song like "At Dawning." I think that was a composition for piano. When Victor Herbert wrote a song, something like that, anybody could play it over the radio and make money for playing it



over the air, or anyone talented enough could hire instrumentalists from the union who would be paid to play music that Victor Herbert composed and pay Herbert nothing. So he formed with a few other composers ASCAP, the [American] Society of Composers, Authors [and Publishers], and they put the bite on individual radio stations and later the TV networks and stations. Now they pay a tremendous fee every year. If you get into ASCAP and you compose a few good songs, why, you can almost live on the royalties.

LASKY: Which seems fair.

MAY: I did houses for several composers. We did the David Rose house in Riviera Ranch, and that's where he composed "Holiday for Strings." And we designed a house for Lou Alter, who wrote "Manhattan" among other compositions, and we are doing one for Mr. and Mrs. Jimmie Van Heusen. They might be starving authors without ASCAP.

Architects are the same way: you work hard to build something unique, that's a new idea. Then the builders come in and just copy it, usually badly, and that kills it.

We've also had an influence on a lot of houses, which I think is good. You see houses and you can say, "Well, here's one of the houses to which I contributed." You look at it and you just know it isn't your house because it doesn't look quite right, like an illegitimate child, but



there it is. But at least it's better than what they would have had, so there's been some contribution.

There's one right here right across from the Brentwood Country Club. You look at it, you can see all the earmarks of my work. A young man did it, and he did quite a few and did pretty well, but just gave up, I guess, and couldn't make a go of it. I see houses all over this county and all over the state that I believe have been influenced by my experimenting and designs.

Of course the low-cost house that Chris [Choate] and I did later--we copyrighted that--they really copied us on that one. We came up with the idea of doing a really good low-cost House Building System. Chris had this idea of-- The trouble with most prefabricated houses, prefabricating parts of it, being like the whole wall, you move it out and it's big and unwieldy, and he had the idea of Tinkertoy parts--interchangeable. By looking at the part you knew where it went. There were no plans, you just say that and--

LASKEY: You mean so that an individual could actually put up their own house?

MAY: Yes, build his own house. But we were much too soon. It was back in '52, '53, '54. And if we had come out with it a few years later, it would have been easier. But it was very simple to figure out what was wrong. We built one





house on a site in Sullivan Canyon to make sure it would work. We put it up in one day. And we had invited three or four important builders to look at it, and one builder who was unknown. I believe he'd never built but two houses, but he came. He fell in love with it and said he wanted to build 950 of them immediately, and he had the finances. He turned out to be Ross Cortese and he built the 950; later he became famous for his Leisure Worlds. The minute he started building and selling the houses we designed for him, all the big tract builders down at Long Beach, their tracts slowed selling. And those are big fellows like Weingart, Ben Weingart, they're having all the trouble with his estate now. And the building and loan man, I can't think of his name, but he's one of the biggest building and loan men here in town now, he stopped selling--Mark Taper! This isn't my story, I read about it in House and Home. They researched it and found out what the sales were, and that's included in the article. They headlined our house as the fastest selling house in America at that time.

LASKEY: Now the first tract was built in Long Beach?

MAY: \*[Not exactly the first. We had done a tract for Stern and Price in Cupertino, near San Jose, the year

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



before, nine hundred houses, and they sold out from four models, sold as fast as they could sign up the buyers. That experience started Chris and me to think.]

But Cortese built [in Long Beach] conventionally without panels, because in production building, Cortese thought they could go faster. We did not have the panel production set up at that time. We had the panels built one at a time for this first model. It went up fast. We'd be finished with the panels and roof, and ready for interior finish before the end of the day.

There's probably fifteen things that many people who went into the prefab business don't know. For instance, one thing: we'd do the panels, which takes a tremendous investment and money to pick the parts all out and have them all sit in a warehouse and store them and then sort them out and load them and send them out in a package. So you're in the financing business, and then your dealer doesn't have the money to pay you. And so he wants to get a loan. Then your loan comes from a loan company, and then you've got to borrow money to finance him. This is just one of all kinds of pitfalls in it.

LASKEY: Did you have to attend to all those details as well as the designing of it?



MAY: Yes, I did all that myself. I had twenty years of building and construction experience, so I knew somewhat more about the construction end than [Chris] did.

SECOND PART

SEPTEMBER 30, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. May, the last time that we talked, one of the subjects that came up was copyright designs, which is something that I think that you have a great deal to say on and have had a great deal of experience with.

MAY: Yes, I have. I certainly didn't start it, but we sure worked at it hard and learned a great deal.

They say-- What is it? "Copying is the sincerest form of flattery." And that's good up to a point and I like to help everybody we can, but then people take ideas that you have spent literally tens of thousands of dollars to research and develop like we did in our low-cost house. When I say "we," [I mean] Chris Choate and I. And we perfected it and we go on the market with it, and they jump in and copy, it seems to me that we should be given some right. And the federal government does, too, because they have copyright laws just to prevent that, and they're enforceable.

There are two things that determine whether you're copying. I know that if you have a person who's copying your drawings and he has access to the drawings, or if he



copies drawings that have an error in them and he copies the error, obviously he has copied. And I think if he does both, why, it's a cinch. There's no question then at law that he copied.

This started out a number of years ago. I had been building a type of house, and we had quite good success with it. When I left San Diego, as I told you before, many of the builders picked up and carried on, which I didn't mind, because it was sort of a compliment, and to help the people live better than they were in the box houses of San Diego at that time. That was fine, it didn't bother me. And I always had more work than I could do for most of my life. So it still doesn't bother me.

But after we had done the Pacesetter House with Elizabeth Gordon in House Beautiful, published in 1947, Chris Choate was doing my color renderings, the big drawings we'd give the client at that time to show what the finished house would be when it was completed. We were talking one day about housing and how we could get the cost down, because by this time cost of housing had just started to increase in price. I think I told you \$2.50 in '31 in San Diego, then to \$3 and gradually up, and, about the time the Pacesetter House was built, it was around \$12 a square foot. We were seeing what we could do to bring it back down, never thinking it would go to \$100 a foot. Of





course, that's not all because of inflation; it is also that the house contains more and is built better now.

But, back to the copyrighting. We decided we would do this low-cost house and had some ideas for it. So, I then contacted one of the young men that was an attorney who was a specialist in copyright and who worked for the moving picture industry. He was in charge of copyrighting the moving pictures and the script that went into them. Everything that they could copyright or patent he handled. One of many attorneys, I suppose, but he was the one that I contacted. He seemed to know a great deal about what he was doing. He told me how we had to put the notice on the drawings, "Copyright: Cliff May/Chris Choate" and the date, plus more, such as "reserving all rights," etc. The drawing (or drawings) was then blueprinted. That would be the first publishing. That was notice to anyone that you had a copyright. At that time, within thirty or forty days of copyrighting, you had to send the drawing into Washington with a form. Then you filled it out, and they sent you back your copy with a copyright notice on it that said this is copyrighted.

LASKEY: Now you actually could copyright the design of the building, the floor plans?

MAY: That is correct. The floor plan and the elevations. And the plot plan. And the details. Everything that goes



to make up a set of drawings, including the specifications, you can copyright. So we proceeded that way. I bring up having to send it to Washington at that time; the law has changed as of now in 1982, I'm talking late September. You publish your drawing; by publishing you publish it with the blueprinting and issuing the first copies and then subsequent copies all with the copyright notice on it. The copyright has more than just "copyright." It says the drawings and the details of construction or modes of construction are the property of-- And the recipient agrees that he accepts those under those conditions, and so forth. It's quite a long paragraph that's put in small print. Then it's on our title block on the drawings.

But now, it's got so complicated. Say you send in fifteen or twenty drawings a year. Now the California courts and the federal court both issue copyrights. We also have the unfair competition [law] in California. The federal copyright holds that if you publish it by blueprinting it and the notice is on, you don't do anything about it until the day that you decide to sue somebody, or you find an infringer at that time, then you can send it in to copyright. It only takes ten days to send it in. With this new method of publishing it, and then not having to send it to Washington for copyright, the copyright is valid



and you put it on anytime prior to when you want to use the copyright for a lawsuit.

LASKEY: Is it usual for an architect or a designer to copyright his plans?

MAY: It is now. It's getting more and more so. I don't remember anyone who doesn't do it, especially now. In talking to Ed Martin, who's quite interested in our lawsuit, we sent him the reports from the court reporters, and they sent their attorneys, who in turn advised them about what to do.

Now [Deems, Lewis, Martin, and Associates] have their own computer readouts. They call it the software. They will sell them to other architects, how to frame a building by their methods in which they are sold to an engineer for a price; so it's marketed like a songwriter markets his songs through records. So it's a good thing, it's a coming thing, and I think it's a fair thing. Because why share or give away when you have spent \$20,000 to develop a nail-on sash? As soon as [our nail-on sash] went on the market it was copied so fast we couldn't get there fast enough. We had patents on nail-on sashes and doors, which is different than the copyrights [which covers] the drawings-- We were so busy also that we didn't have a chance to even chase them on the copyrights or go after them on the copyrights.



On the patents it was just like trying to put your finger in the dam, the dam was building all over the country.

It was a tremendous advance. Up to this point on low-cost houses, you bought a window frame and if you were adept and wanted to save a little money you made it yourself, so there was no window frame profit. But then you had to buy the windows from the mill and the mill had to fit the frame. The finish carpenter had to fit again and hang the door or window and apply the hardware. Then you built your house; the rough carpenter made the opening in the wall with the header and double studs on both sides and then cripples below the window and then rough-saw or a two-by-four under the window. Then the window slid into the opening, then you had to put waterproof paper all around it and make sure that the plaster got under the waterproof paper and then inside you had to do molding. A pretty complicated thing to get a window in or a door. A door's even more [complicated], because you've got a sill. You have to keep the water from coming in with a sill. So, you bought separate doors, you bought separate frames, or else you built your own at more expense.

So to make a big cost saving in the fenestration and exterior doors in our system, we came up with the idea that if we just took a window--start with the easy one first--just a fixed window, buy the window from the mill, and we





decided to have four lights, which means four pieces of glass, two high, so you can see that it would be two high and two wide; that'd be four lights, two high. So we took that and we designed it so that it would be nailable to house framing, made of our patented and copyrighted panels, to the outside of the building. You nail it to the mudsill on the bottom and you nail it to the plate on the top, and you're all done. And that was your five windows in our smallest plan. Then we had one that had a windowpane that slid in it, or two that slid in it. You selected where you'd nail that on with four nails well placed or six well placed, and you're all finished. It was revolutionary.

And then we came up with the doors, the French doors, which we used throughout the houses for access because we figured there was more light and air in a small house, with 950 square feet up to 1,250 feet. So we had the doors delivered with a two-by-three hinged to the door and the astragal was on one door, and it took no detail plans to build the house, because you saw where the door went because of the modules. It would be between two posts, so you just center the door between the two posts and then screw the two-by-three to the building and, then with the hinges, the doors open and shut. And there was no sill because we let it overhang the slab only a threshold. So



it was as simple as that. It took just hundreds of dollars off the cost of the house.

So that was the beginning of our copyrighting and patenting. We had patents on that, but, as I say, it was so good and so simple that the dam just broke on top of us. We couldn't do anything about it, so we just kept on going, keeping ahead.

LASKEY: Now this was in 1947?

MAY: No, I said Chris and I were talking between '47 and '50. In '50 we made a partnership to go ahead and build these houses, and this was a result of that partnership of the "nail-ons." It became called the "nail-on sash," and it was another method, and a far cheaper way, of building houses. But it was a first for us, that's for sure. I mean, we created a first in the building industry with the "nail-on sash."

LASKEY: Now, were these the houses that were built in Long Beach?

MAY: Yes. They did not use the nail-on sash. They used the nail-on sash fixed, but I think he hung the others. There was nobody to make them at the time, so I think he made a combination of-- But it was the "nail-on sash," and that's where it got its biggest promotion.

After that we refined it somewhat. We worked it out with weatherstrips. Then we had them come, so they would



be all primed where you'd put on one coat of paint. We had them with the locks installed. There was just nothing to it. That was how we could put a house up in one day. The sashes were all there. For one guy, we were putting up the windows and making the frames and hanging the windows and putting in the sash weights or whatever else to raise and lower the windows so the mechanical equipment would have the windows slide up and down, then grease them and paint them. Then we were all finished, and on to the next house.

LASKEY: You literally could put it up in one day.

MAY: Oh, yes. We have pictures of that. In fact, my moving pictures, which is quite a rare thing to have now, we have them showing a house going up, and every hour we took a picture to show the men working. We do have the stills.

If you want to stop for a minute, I can just take a look to refresh my memory of some of these things.

LASKEY: Sure. [tape recorder turned off]

MAY: Another one and a very important simplification on the low-cost house that we did was that you could recognize the parts. By looking at the parts you knew where each one went, so you didn't have to go to a set of drawings and find the length of the studs, measure, and better yet, no layout of the framing was required. Everything was all precut and everything was prefit. We dumped the load; it



was made up by the distributor. The whole house came in one load, and he would dump it. The things on top would be the first things you used, like the mudsills, and then the next things would be the outside panels, then the inside panels, then the roof, and that was the end of the house for the day. We had that whole assembly up, having previously put in the slab and the plumbing and the electrical.

LASKEY: And I see here the cost is \$7,495 at the time.

MAY: That's right. And we were selling those on your lot for \$7,400 in Cupertino, the first one.

LASKEY: Now this was the house that you eventually lost the lawsuits on?

MAY: No, we never lost a lawsuit on it. This is the one we won all the lawsuits on. All of them. But the first one--

LASKEY: That's what I mean.

MAY: Yes. One of the first ones was that the builder came down from Fresno, and he came to the office and said he wanted to build our houses and that he was willing to pay us \$50 a house. We told him, no, the price was a \$150 a house, but he could sure make more money with us than he could by trying to make shortcuts.

"Well," he said, "all I pay is \$50 and I'm going to go copy the house anyhow."





I said nothing until we found out that it was just exactly our house as well as he could do. So we had a very good attorney, and he just went to San Francisco and saw the head of the Bank of America, who had the financing, and said, "Look, you're copying our houses. We'll file a lawsuit against you and the builder. You're carrying the financing. We don't want to do it."

The bank said, "We don't want you to do it either. Who should we send the check to?"

So they sent us checks. We got \$150 a house until the whole tract was built, paid for by the bank. That's what the bank thought about our copyrights.

This was the second one. The first lawsuit-- I keep a record of these, someday you could make a copy of this suit. I'm trying to get them in order. The first suit was a [firm] named Norlie Brothers, and they were up in-- No, I take that back, it wasn't Norlie.

LASKEY: [Sam] Caplan?

MAY: Caplan. No, Caplan was the second one.

LASKEY: Oh, was he?

MAY: Yes, and the first one was an old man [Carsten F. Dedekam] who was financing a young builder, and the builder was Ben H. Hardister. And Hardister was all ready to go on prefabrication. He knew a lot about it. He hadn't done it yet, but he was all set to go. As a result, he came down



to see us and we told him, fine, we'd go with him and make him one of our dealers. So, he was to make all of his own parts and put them together and sell them to other people, which was the beginning of our distributionship. We were going to have distributors, then assign territories to each distributor, who would have an exclusive distributorship, who would then assemble the parts so that other builders could erect them.

In this case, Hardister built his own parts and erected them. He was just getting started. Anyhow, he stopped paying us and started changing it to what his thoughts should be. We had a contract with him, so we filed suit. Here it is, it's the second suit, let's see. No, I'm wrong.

LASKEY: That was in July of '53. Now your suit with Alcap [Investment Corporation]--

MAY: Alcap, let's see-- The first one was with Hardister, and it says the old man was seventy-six and in poor health who had not been building and wanted to get out of it. Meantime, this young man took the plans and changed them. It says that Judge [Hilliard] Comstock reached his decision on the basis of six separate agreements Hardister and Dedekam signed with May and Choate. The six agreements: one of them was that they promised to respect the confidential nature of May's designs and acknowledged May and



Choate's ownership of them and agreed not to "contest or assist others in contesting the ownership, the scope, or validity" of the L.A. partners' copyrights or patents. And the judge ruled the contracts required a "confidence that should remain inviolate." He added: "Whether the plaintiffs have any valuable secrets or not, the defendant knows the facts, whatever they are, through a special confidence that he accepted. The property may be denied, but the confidence cannot be. . . . The first thing to be sure of is that the defendant shall not fraudulently abuse the trust reposed in him. . . . If there is any disadvantage in the fact that he knew the plaintiff's secret, he must take the burden with the good."

So, that was our first one. I don't remember what we received, but we were handsomely paid, as I remember it. For value, we had good value.

LASKEY: I see.

MAY: Then the second one, I think I told you, was the one in Fresno which was the Alcap Investment [Corporation], which was a man named [Sam] Caplan.

LASKEY: Now, was he the man who violated the arrangement that you'd had? Who wanted to pay the--?

MAY: Let's turn this off here, I think there's a mistake. [tape recorder turned off] Caplan was the first successful copyright lawsuit we had and Hardister was the second.



LASKEY: Right.

MAY: And the way I prove that now is that we had a different attorney on Caplan. That was [William H.] Nicholas.

LASKEY: First, you went from Caplan to Hardister and then to William [M.] Bray, which seems to have been the most important of the lawsuits.

MAY: That's right. William Bray was an AIA architect and was quite well known and he-- [tape recorder turned off] He obtained a job for a prominent family's son [Jay Beesemyer], who was building houses--now the name of the family [Beesemyer] was well known in mortgage circles.

We first became aware of the house when we were told that their houses were being built in an area where we knew there were no houses, so we went by and took a picture of the house. I remember when it was used in the magazine it said, "May and Bray--Which Is Which?" And the magazine got them switched, they didn't have them right either.

LASKEY: Oh, really? Now where was the house built?

MAY: It was built in-- Bristol Manor was the name of it. It was built out in Santa Ana, where the big boom was going on at that time.

To put a few things in here, by copying they say: "There are various ways of copying plans. The direct method would be to trace, photograph, or blueprint the original plans. An indirect method would be to commit them





to memory, and retrace them. Even more indirectly, a copy would be made according to instructions from a third party who had seen the original plans. The new thinking on the subject goes a step further and asks, if the copyist makes his plans after having looked at, studied, perhaps measured and photographed the original building (which is not in itself eligible for copyright protection, only its plans are, we must remember), has he not indeed copied the original plans? If this interpretation should be developed and upheld, it is believed that a complaining architect should be able to obtain practical legal protection."

And in fact, that's what happened with our [lawsuit]. We were able to show that they had to have plans for building permits to reproduce the building. Anyway it looked, they had to have a plan from which to work and, therefore, if they had a plan, they recreated a plan, which is a copyright infringement.

LASKEY: Now, did he reproduce the house exactly?

MAY: So exactly that we were sent a picture of the house, Bristol Manor, and they had a picture of our house, and then the publisher reversed the pictures. He didn't know which was which they were so much alike.

The way we knew we had Bray, though, was we got a copy of his drawings. Once you file suit you can demand whatever you need to do, and we had made an error in our



drawing of the kitchen cabinets. We were making an inexpensive cabinet which would be very functional, no hardware and everything fit and very few pieces, and we made it and we had a mistake in it. When we got it finished the drawer wouldn't open. We didn't pay any attention to it because we knew how to tell who was doing it how to fix it, and we were going so fast we just left it there. But Mr. Bray obviously had the drawings because he copied the drawer that wouldn't open. Under copyright law there are two factors you're dead on if they catch you, either one: possession of the drawings, if you have possession of the drawings that's prima facie evidence that you copied; the other is that if you copied a mistake in the drawings.

LASKEY: Where did he get your drawings?

MAY: We don't know. But I do know one thing, we had another architect, AIA both of them, who copied our drawings at the permission of the owner. And that was the sixth one I was trying to get for you. I knew we had another one.

It was Mr. [Fletcher Jones], very wealthy, wealthy; he came up so fast he was one of the six young men put on the cover of Time magazine who had made \$50 million, I think before they were thirty or something like that. Maybe I stretched the \$50 million. Maybe it was \$10 or \$15 [million] before they were thirty. His name was Fletcher



Jones. He was head of Computer Sciences. He was one of the first computer geniuses who knew how to do it, way before anybody else did it, and made a fortune. He engaged us to do a tremendous house for him. It turned out to be I was the third architect he had engaged. The other two had been let go, or left in disgust. One of them was Paul Williams, preceding me. One was an architect, I can't remember his name, in Santa Barbara.

It turned out to be the late Mr. Fletcher Jones's method of doing business, so when I had the drawings complete, and I had completed everything--racetrack, grandstands, let-down barns for hot horses to cool them down, we had stables, a bunkhouse for the workmen, garages--

LASKEY: This was a personal racetrack?

MAY: This was a personal racetrack in Santa Ynez Valley, called Westerly Stud. We had the entrance gates, we had a gateman's house, we had the bunkhouse for all the workmen, more buildings than I can remember--hay storage, grain storage--and then we had the big main house, a three-story house he wanted. I didn't want it to be three-stories, so I finally came up with the idea of making it two-stories for everybody except for the family, which was three-stories. The three-story side was cut away and opened onto a lake that we dug. We had the boys have a fire pole so



they could go down into the gym room in the basement like he wanted, but by getting a basement on the third side which opened to the lake we got sunlight in the rooms facing south. So the basement had sunlight. We had fire poles because I knew that the boys would never go down stairs and back up the stairs, but they'd probably go down a fire pole and then they'd have to go up the stairs to get back. So he bought that idea, but it's a big, long story. We were fired.

LASKEY: You were fired by Mr. Jones? But you had made the design?

MAY: Yes. All the designs had been made and approved. And he made payments on them except the last payment he wouldn't pay, which was typical of Mr. Jones. So the day before the trial in superior court to get our money that he owed us on the drawings, not thinking that he'd ever copied them--

LASKEY: Now you were suing him for what?

MAY: For the balance due on the payments on the contract for the drawings that we had prepared for him.

LASKEY: I see.

MAY: We got a court order to go to the architects' office [Morganelli-Heumann and Associates] and went through their files. They opened up the files and there were all my drawings in their file. Well, that changed the whole





[complexion] of everything because I didn't know they'd been copying us. Because in his letters to me, he'd said that "we have wasted so much time with your drawings and now we're going to have to start from scratch again." So that threw me off. I thought he was just going to throw them away.

But, instead of that, he hired another architect to do it. And the other architect was an interior designer that had no experience with ranch houses, or my kind of a house. We didn't see it until later, but when we did see it we found mistakes like you never could believe. Jones told the architect to shorten our building because ours was too long, he said. It was better proportioned longer, and when it was shortened, he didn't save anything, he just wrecked the look of the building. When they shortened it, they didn't know what they were doing, so they put the fire pole right down through the center stairs. They couldn't even read their own drawings. So, we found horrible mistakes on the thing, but everything was copied-- A pulpit balcony was copied right down to the little button on the bottom. Just a dead copy.

We didn't have too much trouble with that, although we did have to go to court. We sued him-- The copyright, we just knew about it because we were going to court the next day and we'd just found it. The suit was all prepared and



we didn't want amends but we wanted to get the money anyway.

So, we put on the suit, and he didn't even show up the first day. His cavalier attitude was that he was too good for the courts. Finally the judge asked, "Well, where's your defendant?"

And he [the attorney] said, "Well, I'll have him here this afternoon, Your Honor."

And he said, "Well, you'd better, if you want him to take part in this lawsuit."

So, they brought Mr. Jones in, who was quite arrogant, and he got up on the stand and, when the judge wasn't looking, he would mouth obscenities at me. You can't imagine such a man. The case had a jury and proceeded along lies and misrepresentations, but we had him where we wanted him. We knew we had him, because we had the drawings that had been copied, but he didn't know we knew that.

We proceeded along and finally at the end of the second day he was exasperated and he turned to his lawyer and said, "Let's wind this up; let's get out of here."

The judge said, "Well, come into my chambers," and they went into the chambers, and I waited outside. The jurors were excused.

They came back, and the attorney said, "Well, Mr. Jones has just fired his attorney, and they're going to pay



what they owe you." But Mr. Jones made his attorney pay a third of it-- Half of it, he had to pay half of it because he said he wasn't being represented properly, which was not true. The man did a fine job with no reason to win.

The judge came back to the court and announced to the jury, "This is now Wednesday and if Mr. May has not received his money by Friday, the balance will double each day." I think the judge was fed up with Jones's attitude and he wanted to be sure he got this thing over with.

That afternoon, that was Thursday, I believe, we left court and at seven o'clock the next morning I got a phone call from my attorney [Nicholas] that Fletcher Jones had-- [Jones had] told me what a great pilot he was. We talked flying during our association of building the house and how he'd just got his instrument rating and how easy it was. He had a computer mind and he had been able to read the figures and figure out where he was, but he didn't know how to fly blind. He couldn't fly like an instrument or a computer. Anyhow, Mr. Fletcher Jones crashed going straight down into his ranch and was dead.

The attorney called me to meet at the bank at eight o'clock. They would open the bank especially for me because he had a check, Mr. Jones's check. It turned out it wasn't Mr. Jones's check, it was his own attorney's check because he was the attorney for the estate. But Mr.



Jones had just fired the attorney, to give you an idea how some attorneys work. So the attorney was fired, but he was giving me his check to lock himself in. I didn't care. That was his business. I'm not going to get involved. I had nothing to do with it, that's all I knew about it.

They gave me the check, and I took it to my bank. My bank called back and said the check's no good.

So my attorney called him and said, "You've got until this afternoon before it [the amount] doubles."

And he said, "Take it back to the bank, I've arranged for a loan now and my check is now good."

So, he'd gotten some money from a loan to make my check good, so therefore he was now the attorney for the estate, which he was forever, and the poor dead Mr. Jones didn't know what happened. But we got paid. Those are the kind of things you run into. But that's not an everyday occurrence.

This was the number seven copyright suit. We won seven in a row and never lost one. We have another one coming up, the biggest copyright suit in architecture in history.

LASKEY: You have another one coming up?

MAY: It will be more money involved than any other architectural copyright suit in history. That's a big





statement, but I've been in all of them and I know what they've been.

LASKEY: What is this one?

MAY: I can't put it on the record yet, but I'll tell you about it later. It has to do with copying and not copying and omitting--omissions. It's interesting. We have even better representation and better facts now than we did in the prior cases. In the prior cases, we were making it while we were on thin, thin ice, well, not thin ice. We are on new ground, breaking new ground. It, of course, held with my lawyers' theories, the whole point being that the artists are being protected more and more. I just recently found out that there's a law in Europe that they have. It's a Latin word that means "take care of the artist's interests, not take care of the artist's money." Our copyright in America is "take care of the artist's money and forget about his interests or his art." Our copyright laws have been broadened constantly to include this new theory.

Just recently there was a big federal case with the English scriptwriters suing the American Broadcasting Company here in America--an American citizen working in London--and using that theory, why they beat the American Broadcasting Company for destroying their work by capsuling it. You write for an hour's show in Britain because



there's no advertising. So the whole show takes an hour to explain and unravel and have a conclusion. The Americans have to get fifteen minutes of advertising out of every hour; so they took the work which the artist had agreed that the British Broadcasting Company would not truncate, meaning to cut, or would change the meaning or would change anything that would--without the authority or permission of the author or the writer. Of course, the American Broadcasting Company cut out fifteen minutes. When they did, they made a fool out of the writer because it didn't make sense, right at the peak, to cut that part out. They didn't know what-- Being businessmen, they didn't know what the writer was trying to get over or the thought or the theme or the idea behind the whole play, and it was a complete diaster. So the result would be that the writer would be laughed out of town if he tried to do another job for any other broadcast station, based on what he had done there. The courts now are swinging back to encourage artists to be able to do work without fear of having it stolen from them like they did in the old days. [That's] just an aside about the artist.

Back to the Fletcher Jones case: We were not [suing him] on copyrights, we were [suing] on copying. There's a difference. Copying, that's unfair competition. It's different from copyright where--



LASKEY: Oh, really? What's the difference?

MAY: We didn't go on the basis that it was a copyrighted drawing with Fletcher Jones. They just had copied the plan. There wasn't even a copyright notice on in those days. He just copied them. So that's unfair competition, to take something of yours. For copyright, otherwise you'd be in federal court, you see. I take it all back, this makes the eighth-- We've got another one on top of that. Six was in the superior court, Fletcher Jones. Then, after we received our payment that was due us under the contract for the preparation of the drawings from Fletcher Jones's attorney, not his estate because his estate had not yet been created, although it may be created with the attorney taking over, then we came across the copyright. Then we realized we had a copyright action. We filed suit against the architects and the Fletcher Jones estate for copying.

LASKEY: So you sued them both for copying and for copyright infringement?

MAY: Yes, and for unfair competition on the first one. We won that one. So that makes how many now? That's eight, right?

LASKEY: Seven, I think.

MAY: That makes seven. It's eight that's coming up. In the federal court it was a tough one because we had the judge who was, we were told, was prejudiced against the



Bank of America, who was the Jones Estate trustee, to judge for us, Judge Hall, Peirson Hall, I think it was.

LASKEY: Now this is the Caplan?

MAY: No, I'm back now to the last one, which is the number seven, which is the Fletcher Jones copyright infringement by the architects Morganelli and Heumann. I referred to them as the interior designer and another architect who copied our drawings.

LASKEY: Newman?

MAY: Heumann. The drawings, having had copies, we had a big list of all the changes from our drawings. We made duplications and showed every change we found. I spent probably \$30,000 in preparation for drawings and photographs and time to analyze all the differentials between all of the--

We made lists of two columns: May had tables to seat fourteen cowboys. They had tables to seat fourteen cowboys. May parked six and a half cars, one being a trailer. They had six and a half cars. Everything that we did--they had. We had a stable for forty-two horses. They had a stable for forty-two. If we had one for thirty-eight, they had thirty-eight. Just copy, copy. And they copied the mistakes, as I said. We made a tremendous amount of preparation, because this was going to be a big, big lawsuit.





We got down to court and we had a judge who was rough. In court he said, "I don't like the Bank of America and when the Bank of America comes in here I'm going to sock it to them." He was really rough like that. I don't know how he got away with it, but he did. He just let it be known, not that blatant, but he let it be known that he didn't like big banks, and he didn't like big this and big that. The little guy has just as much right in his court as the big banks.

LASKEY: You were lucky.

MAY: About a week before we were going to trial before him, he [Judge Hall] died. Then we were shoved in with all of his work, and all of the work that other people had before Judge Hall, into another judge's case [load]. The judge [Manuel L. Real] there was well known in legal circles, I am told, to be very lax and incompetent. He had a Spanish name that he insisted on being pronounced in an Americanized way. Not to bring anything like that in, but he was an opinionated man who--

So when he got our case, the attorney said, "We're going to be in trouble because he's got more work than he knows what to do with and he's going to get rid of it as easy as he can." He just listened to each side briefly and he said, "All right, summary judgment for the Fletcher



Jones estate." He never heard anything from either side. Just read the papers and heard no evidence.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: Really.

So my attorney got up and he said, "Well, just hold it. I want to say one thing for the record." And he went right through the whole thing. The judge couldn't stop him. He got going and he was not going to be stopped.

He explained the whole thing. How it could not be a summary judgment, because a summary judgment means that there are no facts to try. "If everything is what one side says it is," he says, "that's right, but I think I should have a chance to explain them." Then you got summary judgment. But if they say, "The custom in the trade is that you do it this way," and then the other guy says, "It is not, the custom of the trade is to do it this way," then you can't have a summary judgment because you've got to hear why you can or can't, who's right. If you have a major disagreement, then you can't have a summary judgment. But he gave it to Fletcher Jones anyhow with all kinds of disagreement.

So all that was appealed. So it meant for five years our waiting. We prepared all of our papers at great, great expense again. Then we went on the appeal. On the appeal I was there. There were three appellate judges [Wright,



Sneed, and Farris]. The lawyers got up and said, "It's all settled, we got the judgment, and the court ruled to hold it."

There was one colored judge, who was just terrific, and he said, "What you said now-- Let me get this straight--"



SEPTEMBER 30, 1982

MAY: The appellate judge, Sneed, after hearing the arguments, called on the opposing attorney for Mr. Fletcher Jones's estate and said, "Now, if I understand it, lawyer, what you're saying is that Mr. Jones paid for the drawings up to the preliminary drawings."

"That's right. Yes, that's right," said the lawyer.

He said, "Well, then, wasn't he [May] supposed to get another 7.5 percent from the working drawings? Is that right?"

He said, "No." He said, "He was, but he didn't do the drawings. Mr. Jones had somebody else to do them."

"Now, what you're telling me, lawyer, is that Mr. Jones paid Mr. May to do all the design work, and then he got somebody else to do it, and paid them to do it. So, then Mr. May didn't get paid for the whole contract?"

"That's right," he said.

"Do you think that's fair? In other words, what you're saying now is that you could have somebody come out and just design you a house and then take the drawings and have somebody else do them and then not pay him. Is that right?"

He says, "Right."

His Honor said, "Fine."

Then, about a few minutes later they said I won.





LASKEY: That's great.

MAY: That's exactly what it was. That's exactly what Mr. Jones had done with two other architects. I was the third one to be taken that way. So, as I look back though, I remember I was talking to Paul Williams, who was--

LASKEY: Now, Paul Williams had been the previous architect?

MAY: The second architect, whom I followed.

I said, "Why didn't you tell me anything about it?"

"Well," he said, "Cliff," he said, "you know, it doesn't bother me a bit. It's like a streetcar. There'll be another streetcar coming along," he said. "Why waste my time with one I just missed?"

Then I thought back over the years, this is a long time later now, I never made any money doing this. I mean, this was something for the good of the profession. I think they appreciate it, because a lot of friends have told me, asked me for copies, asked me for information. My lawyers had lots of calls from architects who've been hurt.

I remember I got a call from Welton Becket and Jack [B.] Beardwood, who had designed the record building for Capitol Records in Hollywood, the big, round building, like a [stack of] records. They were being sued, and they called me frantically--what should they do? Not that way,



but did I have any ideas for them because they were being sued for copying a round building--

LASKEY: Oh, really!

MAY: Which obviously they hadn't. In both places people had the same round building maybe, but I don't think they copied it. I'm sure they didn't because their head designer was Woody Woodruff, and Woody didn't have to copy anybody.

But anyhow, it brought a lot of notoriety. It did help people, but the point I'm making is that I didn't make any money on it because at the time, with the inflation we had going on, the time I spent, the time I did it, and the good money I spent for attorneys, if a dollar's worth a dollar, what I got back was fifty-cent dollars. And even though I got a lot of them back, it didn't pay for my time. It didn't pay for any of it. I could have done twenty houses and made a lot more money than generally what I do, but I just think if you step on somebody and hurt them unnecessarily and ruthless-- Like [Sam] Caplan said, "Nuts to you!" And then goes and takes your product, well, I think, I just like to fight back. That's why I've done it.

Now, this Fletcher Jones matter, I spent a tremendous amount of time, and out of it I got nothing except a cash settlement, which was good, but the cash settlement all



added up to about what I put into the thing. So my time was all for free.

LASKEY: But do you think in the long run, with all the lawsuits, that you have improved the climate for other architects and designers?

MAY: Oh, I'm sure I have, yes, because now the fact that there is a-- There's quite an article written on the Lanham Act. Now it's in the federal law courts; the Lanham Act is a federal law that anybody doing business federally, if they misrepresent in advertising-- Let's say, you're making a cereal, and you're saying this will put hair on your chest, and you advertise it, and it doesn't put hair on your chest, why, then you can be liable for an awful lot of money. Well, if you say this is the best product of its kind, and there's something that's better and you know at the time that there's something better-- Anytime that you advertise, knowing what you advertise is false advertising, then you've violated the Lanham Act.

California has an even better one than the Lanham Act, except federal is better because you have better judges in the federal courts, and the trial time is a little quicker than the state courts. But in the state courts, we have the same kind of act as the Lanham Act, except that, if anybody advertises falsely and knowing that what they advertise is not true, then the attorney general will take



charge of the lawsuit for you, and you can have the attorney general do all the law work for you. You [the advertiser] are really liable. But the thing I'm talking about is the Lanham Act.

In the heading of the Lanham Act, which was brought into play on the British BBC [British Broadcasting Company] scriptwriter against the American Broadcasting Company, was the fact that the artist had rights now that he never had before. In Europe they give the artist more rights than he had. Now they're giving them to him here. But in the broadcast of the--

No, I've lost myself. [tape recorder turned off]

LASKEY: Getting back to Mr. [William] Bray, at what point does it become plagiarism? At what point does he infringe on the copyright of your plans? Suppose, for instance, he had moved a door from one side of a wall to the other, would that have made him OK? Could he have gotten away with that?

MAY: No. No, no. It's the intent. They've got to prove the intent, that he copied. If the four corners are exactly the same and the ridgepole is exactly the same height and the windows are exactly the same kind of windows--he may have placed them in different places--but if to the average person on the street it looked like-- In this they'd say, "If it looks like a Cliff May house," and





then he had access to the drawings, then that becomes unfair competition because he's making houses that look like Cliff May houses when he's not Cliff May.

LASKEY: So, then, he can't just make little changes and hope to get around it that way?

MAY: No, no, no, not at all.

LASKEY: Well, then you had another interesting lawsuit that you had against the General Motors Company, Oldsmobile, which was slightly different.

MAY. Yes, yes, it was different. We had copyrighted drawings in the House and Garden magazine, which the magazine copyrighted. It was my house. It said, "Cliff May's house," and it described the patio and everything. One of the advertising agencies-- They have artists that take this, it's not called "scrap." There's a word for it in the trade, but they just tear things out. When they see some beautiful picture of a sunset, let's say, in Monaco or an ice glacier in Iceland that's suggestive of some kind of drink or something, they just tear these scraps, and they stick them in a file, and then when they get a job for, let's say, a tropical, moonlit night, someone wants to show Kahlua or something, they pull a picture out. So, instead of creating it themselves, they copy it. They're obviously copying, and if you knew what he was copying from, you could prove it. So, he was just plain old copying, and



there are laws against that. That's stealing, to take something that you did not create and palm it off as your own.

And so, this case-- We filed, in two other cases. I told you about Bank of America. We said, "We'd like everybody [to know you used a Cliff May house.]" We said, "We're going to make him pay for it."

And so, General Motors Company's advertising agency, they said, "Look, don't worry about it. We'll pay you--" They paid me something, I don't remember what it was, but then they said, "We'll do better than that: we'll put you where you should have been. You should have had your name on that ad. We'll put you on television. The viewers are five million people. Five million people will see the ad. We'll have your name mentioned on television."

I thought that was better than asking for a new Oldsmobile. [laughter]

LASKEY: So, General Motors did that as part of the payment?

MAY: Yes, Oldsmobile division of General Motors, yes.

LASKEY: That's wonderful.

MAY: And then the other one was-- That was the two, wasn't it? Yes.

LASKEY: It was the idea that in the Olds ad someone had actually just copied-- They hadn't built a building; they



just used the corner of your house as background for their advertising.

MAY: The idea is that, instead of creating it for yourself, you copied it. He copied the Japanese lanterns inside, and the fascia board he copied. Well, the whole thing was just a dead copy.

LASKEY: And then the DeVilbiss Company--

MAY: They copied the front of the house.

A great deal of our house was being built in the early fifties, and they were framing the building when I was East. I had a design with a chimney that went from one point, went all the way back to an intersecting wall. But the mason stopped four feet short of the wall, so the chimney's four feet too short--and then what they called a "valley" came down behind it, which gave a little piece of fascia about four feet-- They had to put a piece of roof between the chimney and the intersecting wall. The chimney should have gone to the intersecting wall. Then it would have been a great big, simple mass--"Less is best"--one wall, one chimney. And here we had one chimney, one wall, and one connecting wall.

So, anyhow, I saw this ad. I regret that I never kept a copy of it, I used to try to keep that stuff, but I didn't used to, like I do now. But, anyhow, I didn't get it, but I remember it very well. It was the error, right



big smack in the middle of the picture. And they said, "This house is painted by DeVilbiss Paint" or something, "spray paint," is all they had printed on there. I was going so fast at that time. I think they said, "Here's a check for \$350," which is what the artwork would have cost. I think that's all we got. We got a very little bit out of it. But it was just the idea that they realized they'd made a mistake and they were sorry. I accepted an apology letter rather than make trouble.

LASKEY: Would you do it over again if you had--

MAY: Oh, yes, certainly. If somebody swiped my wallet and I saw who he was, I would go get it, if I could. If he was bigger than I was, I'd get the law to go. If he was small, I'd go grab it. I mean, it's stealing. It's taking something and possessing it for your-- No, if it was somebody that--a GI or a reasonable person who hadn't much money who came to my house--it happens all the time--I'd say, "Good luck, wonderful."

A woman called me yesterday from Northern California, said she bought the old ranch house book [Western Ranch Houses by Cliff May].

I said, "It's an old book."

She said, "Do you have any plans for sale?"

I said, "No, I don't sell plans, but you wouldn't want one anyhow because it's like you bought a 1952 Ford." I





said, "It was all in the 1950s, all the houses, 1940s and '50s." I said, "Unless you want to buy it for a collector's item, it wouldn't be as good transportation as what you could get now."

A new house now is-- Well, gee, we have acoustical we didn't have in those days. We have insulation that we have to have that we didn't have in those days. We have radiant heat in the floors. We can cool the house at the same time as we heat it. It's a great comfort. We have ventilation, opening sliding doors, shatterproof glass, skylights, baffle walls, plus doors, plus everything.

I said, "You know--"

She said, "Well, my husband is a builder, and we just couldn't afford it."

I said, "Well, take the book and go to your husband and just work it out the best you can. Put all these new things in and use the old plans."

You know, that's fine if they build it for themselves, not go ahead and build it for somebody else for profit.

## SECOND PART

JANUARY 13, 1983

LASKEY: Mr. May, in your career you've combined the traditional ranch style with innovative designs and immaculate craftsmanship. As a result, you've had a series of very



famous clientele. Have you found that the famous are difficult to work for?

MAY: No, on the contrary. I give you a quick example, the chairman of the board of Continental Oil--that's about as high as you can go in the oil business, I guess.

LASKEY: I think so.

MAY: Of course, I find in dealing with so many people, meeting them socially in their homes, the reason they got to the top is that they were gracious, lovely people. Very seldom do you get an obnoxious person with crudity or obscenities or rough on his employees or rough on his friends or rough on his building designer that ever makes it to the top. The ones at the top I think are the salt of the earth really from my experience. The only thing that would change that would be if you went to the top of his own company, he might be ruthless. But when they're at the top of a publicly owned company, they're always just wonderful. Like K. S. "Boots" Adams, the chairman of Phillips Petroleum, is one of the most wonderful persons you've ever met. You feel like you've known him all your life.

LASKEY: How did you happen to--

MAY: The reason they're at the top is that they're smart. Like the late Tommy [Thomas D.] Church the famous landscape architect, said--this is a digression--but like Tommy



Church said, "Anybody that hires [me], [I] buy stock in the company if it's a publicly owned company." I may have told you this--

LASKEY: No, you didn't.

MAY: "Because if they're smart enough to hire me, they're smart." [laughter] So, he's made [as much] money buying stock in their companies as he did for their fee from practicing landscape architecture.

Many of the people have come, and I've said, "Well, how would you like to do this, Mr. X?"

And they say, "Look, you're the building designer, you're the architect, you do it the way you think is best for me."

I'm making an expression, but when the decision comes up--should we do it this way or that way?--he says, "You make the decision."

That's why they're smart. Then they get the best. But when they make the decision on something they don't know, really, other than personal preference, speaking of, let's say, an aesthetic differential, which can happen-- It seems like the higher they go on the ladder the more inclined they are to defer to your decision.

LASKEY: Well, the Adams house, the Boots Adams house, is considered one of your more beautiful houses. How did you happen to get that assignment?



MAY: Well, it's like the old story, if you do one good deed, you get something in return for it. I told you the story about the Harold [C.] Price [house]. Price, Bechtel, McCone during the war, he was the contractor [of] big-inch pipeline and the biggest-inch pipeline. They also have a part of the Alaska pipeline. But he was one of the big pipeliners in the country. I'd gotten his house, and they'd seen it in one of the magazines, I think in House Beautiful. And the Prices came out, and I've told you the story on that--how he wanted to-- He wouldn't tell me what the budget was. He just wanted a small house. That was the story.

Anyhow, we got that house underway, and Mr. Adams saw it one time. About that time we'd done the Pacesetter House, and the two were the catalyst. Mrs. Adams had seen the Pacesetter House, and Price said he had one of my houses. So the next day I went to Bartlesville. So I did two great houses in Bartlesville.

LASKEY: You told me a story about Shirley MacLaine--

MAY: Yes.

LASKEY: --that I thought was very amusing, that you might want to repeat.

MAY: Well, it's a story of Hollywood. It seems that-- This is human nature. If you do something for somebody free and help them, they always turn around and bite you,





especially in this industry, the movie industry. I've dealt with-- Oh, I could name you a dozen people.

Paul Henreid, when he first came out, why, he was unknown, and then he later went way on up. In fact, I saw him not too long ago. He'd changed. I've changed, of course, too, but he remembered the days when we used to bang our heads together, trying to get a house, but he never came to me for the house.

Oh, I could go on. Goff of "Lum and Abner" and the other chap, Chester Lauck, we spent innumerable days looking at land all over the San Fernando Valley to build a house and then when the time came, why, I didn't get the job because I'd worked free. In those early days, why, you did your best to get the jobs. But person after person--

I remember way, way back, the great star, [Alla] Nazimova, she owned the Garden of Allah apartments. That was her home. I met her there, and we talked about a lot of things. Then Miriam Hopkins, who was another wild one at that time, a great star. And Paul T. Frankl asked me to go up and meet her. So we spent a lot of time, free time, and then when the time comes they get somebody else. That's just been the pattern of my lifetime with, as I say, let's call them "celebrities."

So, one day there was a knock on the door, and somebody came in. These were the most pleasant two people I



ever saw. Here's a young woman, and every time she said something, she kind of laughed, and the whole spirit around the office just changed. Her husband, his name was--

LASKEY: Parker, I think.

MAY: Yes, Steve Parker. Mr. and Mrs. Steven Parker, they introduced themselves as. They said they were going to buy a lot at the Malibu and wanted to know if I would build for them.

I said, "Yes, I would. I'd love to."

They came to another meeting. They were so jolly. It was more fun to be with them than other clients who are solemn, you know, real serious.

So, then we looked at the map, and I said, "I'm going to be very frank with you: what you want to do, your lot's only half big enough. You have to get a lot that's at least double the size of this one. You can't build--" They wanted to build, you know, income properties and then have a deluxe suite for them on the oceanfront, on the water, at Malibu.

She said, "Oh, I'm so sorry," and then they left.

I thought, "Well, it's still better to be frank with people than to try to take their money." I'll tell you a Frank Lloyd Wright story someday that you won't believe. But a lot of people just take money. They know that they can't produce, but they take the money to get the drawings.



That happened up our canyon just last week. Somebody took money from somebody where they knew they couldn't build [on the location]. The architect did a whole set of drawings knowing that he couldn't [get] a permit. Well, I've never operated that way, and I guess it pays not to.

On the Parker deal-- So, it must have been about six months later when they called, and they said, could they come out for an appointment. They had good news. They came out and they said, "We bought the lot next door." So that gave them [the] 150 feet that we needed. I think it was 75-foot lots up at the Malibu at this point.

Anyhow, I said, "That's wonderful. Here we go."

So, they had me get in touch with their business manager, who's very astute, and we drew the contracts. I started out with these great ideas that they wanted to do. I wanted to get light into the center of the house, because that's the big problem when you live in an apartment house, condominium, anything. Even the ones we designed for Twentieth Century-Fox; they ruled it out, but they shouldn't have. I had a light well in the center. There we were going to put a glass brick floor in the patio so that they could lie under the piles and be in the sunshine.

These were all great ideas, but with the business manager, he was pretty sharp, he said, "We don't want any



wild experimenting. We just want to get this solidly underfeet."

Anyhow, I was into preliminary drawings with them, and every time we'd meet, why, it was just a happy, happy experience. One day I went to the moving pictures, and they had Around the World in Eighty Days. I wasn't paying any attention to who was in it, and all of a sudden this face kept coming on. When the face came on, I said, "Gee, I've met her someplace." Anyway, it turned out to be Shirley MacLaine. So I had worked with them quite a ways without even knowing it. But that was the way I met them.

Then we had one difficult thing. They wanted eight apartments, and they wanted all eight to have a view on the ocean. So I said, "That's impossible."

"Well," she said, "that's what we want. Why don't you just try and do it?"

Well, she had been so pleasant, why, we tried, we tried. We got seven on the front--and it was almost impossible--we got seven with ocean views in two stories. The one that didn't get an ocean view was the apartment manager. We put him up in the back. It could have been a lot better than it turned out to be, but the business manager kept whacking the budget back. It became finished; it became good but not great.





But they've been friends ever since. Whenever a book [on her] comes out, I get an inscribed copy from her for my inscribed library.

LASKEY: Well, from the presidents of oil companies to celebrities! I'm fascinated personally by how you came to do a house for Roger Corman. That seems to be totally out of the realm of the other people that you had done.

MAY: That's right. I have a friend, we go way back, one of my very best friends. Three of us, Johnny Green of the oil Johnny Greens, Kelvin Vanderlip of the Vanderlips from the New York family, and myself, we were just about three best friends for many, many, many years on the Rancheros Visitadores Ride in Santa Barbara and the Caballero Catalina Island Ride. We were just generally like three fellows who seemed to hit it off.

Anyhow, Kelvin became terminally ill and said he had to sell. He had to make a decision. In fact, I was in on one of the meetings; he wanted my opinion on the thing. He owned the whole Palos Verdes peninsula, and he had a chance to sell it and leave enough money to have his wife and three children forever well taken care of--or gamble. He might be wiped out. And so he made the decision to play it safe. So they sold, and they've been well taken care of all their lives. The people who bought it, Great Lakes Carbon Company, sold the first piece for the whole thing



that they paid for it. They got the whole peninsula of Palos Verdes, everything, for nothing. So, you see, you just never know. But I think he did the right thing, because a lot of things could have happened. You just never know. It was like insurance. He took insurance instead of a gamble. Well, anyway, that was Kelvin Vanderlip, a great friend.

So, anyway his widow Ellen has been very close to me and my family. His widow engaged me to-- Wonderful, a Gordon Kaufmann house is what they lived in. The original Mr. [Frank A.] Vanderlip, Kelvin's father, had it designed. It was sort of the little guesthouse. It was very big though, and the big main house was going to be built later. Gordon Kaufmann was the architect for it. Tommy Church looked at it and said it was one of the greatest Italian villas he had ever seen in Southern California. So, I was asked to put an addition off it, which was going to be a big project--you know, I could have wrecked the house, or make it good--and add a swimming pool and a stage for the kids as they're growing up and dressing rooms. I was quite successful. I left the building alone and came out with a flat deck type of thing, which we never do, but it was very appropriate without having to hook onto Mr. Kaufmann's house and try to do what he would have done. The addition looked more like a beautiful arbor that was attached to it,



and we had outriggers on it, as I remember it. It became very wonderful and useful for the family.

Mrs. Vanderlip was one of the great entertainers of all times. With Kelvin she also was. They used to have thousands of people out to their villeta, hundreds of people.

LASKEY: Now, this was in Palos Verdes?

MAY: It was the old Vanderlip estate.

Anyhow, I'm digressing, but giving you the background. But Mrs. Vanderlip knows about everybody. So anyhow that was how the Corman [job] came. She just called them and said, "You've got to have Cliff May do it."

And they said, "Yes, Mrs. Vanderlip."

Then they wanted a very modern version of a ranch house. It was a very difficult lot. I also sold them the lot, which I developed up in the hills behind my home. They were great to work with, but they knew what they wanted. They were a young couple, young with very young children, and they wanted it to be a statement of our times, "not look over their shoulder," as they said, "like so many houses."

So, we made it, planwise, a great space, great opening, and very simple; it looked very modern. What you see in Spain being built now with the parapet walls and gables. I think we used shakes instead of tile. They're very happy



with it, except the lot isn't big enough, so they're now looking. I'm also negotiating with them to help them find a lot, which we've not yet found. [tape recorder turned off]

LASKEY: On the opposite side of the coin from the expensive, custom-designed homes that you've done, you've been responsible essentially for changing the housing of a nation with your low-cost housing that you applied the same standards to that you applied to your large homes, as I understand it.

MAY: Yeah, that's right.

LASKEY: How many homes have you done, or, I mean, have you done the plans for, considering the low-cost housing?

MAY: On the low-cost housing, we had a manager who ran that end of it, and I did the designing. No, Chris [Choate] did-- I did the designing with Chris. Chris did the basic designing and ran the drafting rooms and getting out the drawings. I toured the country, meeting people and helping get model houses open for the different distributors that we had. We had a manager who did the business end back here, and he claims we did around 18[000] to 20[000]. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, because we never knew what all the distributors finally did when I gave up the low-cost house. I worked for three years at it. I would say we at least built 18,000, based on-- We have a





map on my office wall that shows the tracts [with] over 50 [houses]. There are a lot of those. Of course, the first one we did had 950 houses in it. The next one we did had 1,000 houses in it. So, we started off at a pretty fast clip. Then we had distributors as far east as Pittsburgh. We had them in all the western states. We had Louisiana and a whole lot more. I can't remember.

LASKEY: Well, looking at the map, I can see that they stretched across the entire country. So your influence obviously was felt in all places.

MAY: I learned a great deal from that, illustrated by-- You should have only one string in your bow and shoot straight. I had all this experience in custom houses, so when I went into low-cost houses, I had to start to learn all over again. If I knew what I know now, I would have not done it, I believe.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: Yes, the reason is this, we were right too soon with something great. We could have changed the nation, I think. And they're still trying to do it. We had it, I think, but our problem was that we had too many cities, counties, and states, all with different regulations. Although they say they have a uniform code-- They do up to a point. And then we had VA [Veterans Administration] offices and FHA [Federal Housing Authority] offices.



Take California, for example, because that's one of the biggest states where the most growth took place. We had, as I recall, seven VA offices. Each one of them had different requirements, just minor things, one or two pages, but you still had-- There were changes. FHA, we had five offices. So, five times seven is thirty-five sets of drawings for California. Then we had cities, and each city had it a little different. L.A. electrical code was different from the uniform, the national electric code. That's been changed just recently, but at that time. So, you take five big cities, we must have fifty counties in California, well, it was just an impossible job to make a set of drawings that would fit for everybody. We tried to do it.

We had one great thing. We simplified it down to just bare necessities. All you need is a slab. You don't need a foundation under the whole outside edge of the slab, because we used at every bearing point a drop footing, whether it was twelve-by-twelve or fourteen-by-fourteen inches square, that goes down two feet in the ground and supports the load that's going to hit that point.

We had a post at that [point], so we called it post and beam. We used a five-foot-four-[inch] module, which means that every structural member was five-foot-four apart. That meant that we could go sixteen feet and not



cut off a piece of lumber. We came out with something that revolutionized the sash and door business at the time. We had about six or seven panels, as I recall. One was an outside panel. When it was delivered, it had all the board and batts on it and the paper. All you had to do was tip it up in place. You tipped two of those together, and you had ten-foot-eight-[inches] of wall. You put foundation bolts in the slab, or you could shoot them with an air gun as you put them up. Then we had a half panel, which was the same as that except that it had a window in the top half. Then we had a pair of doors that nailed onto the outside. There was no door fitting necessary. They were all fit when we got them. The windows, you just nailed them on the outside; there was no fitting. You could slip it right on square and then just hammer it on. You call that a "nail-on sash." We took out patents on that, but they copied it so fast we couldn't protect it.

We have pictures where we would have the house up by noon. By nightfall the roof would be on; we would be ready for the rain. They could come and put the drywall in the next day and wire it in one or two days.

The wiring wasn't very expensive. For instance, we would throw the lights. We had a central core that had the bathroom and the heating and the electrical panel and the kitchen, all backed up to one vent, maybe two vents at the



most. That was for the basic one-bath house. All the lights were at that point. In the living room we had soffits, which would be a flat area under the ceiling, high above the door, and continuing from wall to wall. The soffits had floodlights, so we would take the floodlights and shoot the light all the way across with the spots to the far side of the room. Then we wouldn't have to have any wires on the far side. When you would come to some-place, say, where you've got to put plugs every five feet, I think that's it, we'd have to change the drawings for that one person. So we were just in a constant state of flux, changing the drawings and trying to file them and keep them in order. Each distributor was having little specialties they wanted to do too.

It was great while it lasted. But after three years, and I probably crossed the United States in a plane-- I used my own plane. I probably crossed the United States maybe fifteen or twenty times, and it all came to naught, because we built a lot of houses and housed a lot of people, and they all appreciated it. But when we got through, I hadn't been very happy doing it.

In Arkansas, we had a dealer-distributor who was very active, and he had houses all over Arkansas because they were so inexpensive. We used to sell them for \$7,500,





which included the lot. We had some places that were cheaper than that because the lots were cheaper.

One client was Ross Cortese. It was very early. He saw us put up the first house. We put one up in Sullivan Canyon as an experiment to see how fast we could do it. We had three or four selected builders, and he heard about it and asked to come and came with his banker and was so impressed that he immediately went to work. We designed 950 houses for him at Lakewood. And the story, I think, he tells about it is that when he started selling them, everybody else quit until he sold out. That was in the House and Home magazine. That was based on a Time-Life report. The reporter had to get it straight, so it was true.

LASKEY: But you said earlier, at the beginning when you started to talk, that you thought you came too soon because if you had, you know, started now, you could have changed the ideas of the way people lived. But don't you think you did?

MAY: Well, we did, yes.

LASKEY: Very definitely.

MAY: This was the first time we had a low-cost house that was not a little box with a garage sitting in the back of the lot with a driveway eating up the side space. We had the garages out front. We had them so they could add wings



on them. We had a lot of outdoor inducements, like covered pergolas, or ramadas we called them in Spanish, arbors people call them, and walls and baffles and floor-to-ceiling windows. We had two choices. We either had a floor-to-ceiling window or one halfway down so that the bed would fit under it or the sink would fit under it. So, we opened up the house with a tremendous amount of light.

It fit all-- We had them up in Denver, where the snows abound. We had a good heating system design. That was also in the core I talked about. Everything came out of the utility core. Of course, that's what they try to do now.

What I said about being right too soon, we were. The price was right, the house was good, and the acceptance was great. The appearance was good, and it made a neighborhood look a lot better than the boxes they'd been building. Everything was going for it. Patios and courtyards and trees, everything we stand for in Southern California--and successfully. But the work of getting out drawings and getting financing, and everybody had a set of drawings, different, different, and we just had problems, problems, problems.

I remember going to FHA in San Diego. We had a man from Life magazine, his name was Peter Ooms, Life photographer and a pretty sharp boy. We went to the San Diego



FHA, because they would not let us do some little thing to make the house better. They said FHA wouldn't permit it. So, we were in the chief's office in San Diego. I say "we." Me, and I think the business manager we had at the time, and Peter Ooms, who wanted to follow around and get some photographs. So, Peter said, "Well, as I understand it, Mr. FHA, here's a house that fits all the qualifications. It's better; it's cheaper. And yet you won't let them do it because of the way the door swings. Do I understand it right?"

And the FHA chief said, "Oh, well, we're going to change it for May. We're going to let them do it."

He knew it was going to go into a national magazine, and he'd be pinned himself. So, he changed. But you can't do that every time. It wasn't big enough to make a fuss.

Most of the stuff that they made us do: they were right. We had to do it, because that was the way they ruled. [tape recorder turned off]

LASKEY: Basically, then, you just burned out from having to deal with all the regulations and the different--

MAY: Yes, I saw down the road-- I'd been passing on commissions for big houses to friends. I remember one was Burton Schutt. I sent a couple houses to him. He was one of our great architects. He's the one credited with bringing indoor plants from Honolulu here, but I think Paul



T. Frankl beat him. They did it both at the same time is probably what happened.

Then I heard people saying I was not building big houses anymore, and I realized that's where my heart was. By "big houses" I mean single-family houses. We built little houses too. In those days, that was fifties, early fifties, after the war, the low-cost house was '50 to '52, '53, along in there. But most of the houses we built, the great majority of the houses we built in those days [sold for] prices going from \$10,000 to \$25,000 and \$30,000. And then, of course, they went from \$30,000 to \$50,000 and then went from \$45,000 to \$65,000, \$95,000, and just kept coming up as the cost per square foot went up. And also, as the affluence of America, especially the United States, and very, very especially in California, the possessions people had required bigger houses. They had more cars, they had more clothes, they had more furniture, they had two pianos. So the houses eventually started to get bigger.

Then also my ranch-type house appealed to ranchers and farmers. We built a tremendous amount of houses on ranches. California Land and Cattle Company, George Mee became a very close personal friend. Mrs. Mee reminded me of my mother very much. Her voice was almost like Mother's. But they built a fabulous big adobe ranch up on the King Ranch up in King County. It was one of the famous





ranches up and down the coast, all adobe, a real working production ranch. Well, another rancher saw it, and he wanted me to build him one. His name was Irving Bray. He later became head of all the cattle associations in California, cattlemen, big cattle ranches. Then we actually were putting houses on ranches. I guess probably 50 percent of our houses are on ranches. I think of Merced, we had Jack Schwabacher-- Oh, I could make a list of probably twenty-five or thirty on working ranches, because whenever there was a piece on the out-of-doors, they thought of our houses as fitting more than maybe Paul Williams's two-story colonial would. And so we had a little more than our share over the years.

LASKEY: Well, when did you do the Mondavi Winery?

MAY: That had to be about fifteen years ago. [Robert Mondavi] was living in a little, tiny, I guess you'd call it, Napa Valley house built in the 1890s. His mother and father had lived there. They owned the Krug Winery. It was right next to the Krug Winery, and he lived there with his mother. They had these great dreams of-- And then he had a fight with his brother, and his mother sided with his brother. So he sued the both of them, and finally he won enough money to get started, although half the valley-- I say "half the valley," I mean, four or five friends in the valley put up the money, what he could get. He didn't win



the lawsuit till after he had the winery started. But we had carte blanche to design the winery.

LASKEY: Did he want a Spanish style? Did he want that kind of building, or did you think of that?

MAY: He didn't know what he wanted. I thought of that, yes. I said, "You'll have to do the winery [operation design]. I don't know anything about how to make wine. You'll have to do that. But I'll take care of the architecture and put it together."

This is interesting though. It should have made Life magazine, but we didn't think about it at the time and get the pictures. This is, say, December, and he said, "I've got to have this all designed and all built so I can take the spring harvest for the grapes and start to make wine."

I said, "That's only five months, and you can't do the drawings in five months."

He said, "Well, I don't care. That's what you've got to do." He said, "I can't lose a whole year." He said, "That's what you have to do."

He was sort of a driving young man, driving personality.

I said, "There's absolutely no way."

And so he thought, and he said, "Could you give me a big slab, and we could crush them out in the open?"



I said, "We can do that, sure." So, I designed very fast, I do design fast, and came up with the idea. So, as soon as he said, "That's it," why, we had the engineers-- We had an architect from New York named [L.W.] Niemi. He was out from New York. He was a New York architect. He was local to the valley. I always like to have a local architect tend to the working drawings, so he's right on the job. I give him the designs and then supervise him. So, he took the job of drawing it up. So, we located the slab, poured the slab. They got all the pipes in that they needed, and put the tanks up outside, placed the grape crusher temporarily to crush the grapes, and they got the first pressing before the building was started.

LASKEY: What vintage was that? I'll have to buy it.

[laughter]

MAY: I say fifteen years, but it could be looked up. I've been married for seventeen years, and it was under construction when-- So, you might say sixteen or seventeen years.

LASKEY: Well, you said it didn't make Life magazine--

MAY: That was why it would have been a great thing--

LASKEY: --but it did make the bottle. When you go into a market or into a liquor store and you see the Mondavi wine bottles--

MAY: That's right. That's their design. We licensed them to use my design.



LASKEY: Do you want to go up to the bottle and say,  
"That's mine"?

MAY: We have a lot of friends who like-- We serve Mondavi wine because I've got a deal with them, wine for life.

LASKEY: How nice.

MAY: It's nice. But I should have taken a penny a bottle, I'd have been richer. But anyhow--

LASKEY: It's a great building.

MAY: A lot of people like to soak the wine label off and take it home. [tape recorder turned off]

LASKEY: Well, we've talked about expensive houses and low-cost housing, what has been your experience in what we call middle-class housing?

MAY: Well, I've a lot more middle-class, when we're speaking "middle-class," we're speaking pricewise, more middle-class, of course, because there are just more people in that bracket than there are people building big houses. And also a longer period of time.

In San Diego I started in 1930-31. The first house I built was in '31. While they were big houses at the time, they're small houses now. The most expensive house I built in San Diego, I remember the contract price was \$10,500. That's before I left San Diego. That was for the banker who came out during the Depression under Roosevelt.





LASKEY: But that was in the thirties, and that was a lot of money.

MAY: Between '33 and '34. I figure it's about twenty times now. Take for instance wages. We paid fifty cents an hour, and twenty times fifty is \$10. Well, that's \$10 an hour for a wage from fifty cents. But that's wrong. So, it would be forty times, because carpenters are getting \$20 an hour. That's why the prices on houses have gone up. To make it, they're paying the same way, but fifty cents to \$20; that's what a top carpenter gets now. That's of today, January 13--whatever day this is.

LASKEY: Nineteen eighty-three.

MAY: So, anyhow, they were big houses in that day in relationship-- They weren't the little box houses that everybody was building. In fact, I never built a box house. I've never lived in a house that I, except for the first year of marriage, I never lived in a house that I didn't design. I designed them in order to find out what makes them tick and how to make them better, and each house I did, did get better. You know that story.

LASKEY: Well, that brings me to a question that I actually was going to ask you later, but I think this might be a good time to discuss it, which is your house now, Mandalay. First of all, why is it called Mandalay?



MAY: That's interesting. I was a youngster and came to Los Angeles for my first trip to L.A. with my folks, Dad and Mother. I had a drink of water someplace, and I got home, and down I went with typhoid. The last thing I remember was they were shaving my head off. When I came to-- I just about died, I guess. They didn't have the medicines they do now.

I came to, and Dad was playing a record by Abe Lyman. It was a big band at the Coconut Grove in L.A., one of the three bands that recorded on the Pacific Coast. Paul Asche and Abe Lyman and Vic Meyers were the three bands. Anyhow Dad was playing "Mandalay." It was a different "Mandalay," one written by Abe Lyman. It was Charlie Chaplin's favorite tune. In fact, he had Charlie Chaplin's picture on the cover, and it said, "To Abe Lyman, 'Mandalay' is my favorite tune. Charlie Chaplin."

So, anyhow, Dad was playing that, so it kind of stuck with me. You know, it was like being born and knowing what they were saying or the music they were playing, knowing what the piece was. But this was coming back to life and hearing this music. I always liked the melody and words very much, but that's all I knew. I didn't have the sheet music. I had the record, and then it got lost.

Then many years later I married my present wife. She came from Burma. Well, the capital of Burma was named



Mandalay, of course. She was born in Burma, but she had never been to Mandalay. So, one day we said, "Let's go find the record." So, we found the record out in an old record shop in the east end of town. We took it home and played it. All the words just fit. Everything just fit. So, we said, "Let's just call the place Mandalay."

LASKEY: Oh, that's very nice.

MAY: When we built the gatehouse, we chiseled the name on the gates. Then I started collecting Mandalay records, and I've got about forty different kinds.

The greatest coincidences in the world, my life has been filled with coincidences. I've got a record that's called "Rose of Mandalay," that's one of the series, one of the ones I have, and on the back of it is the name "Lisa." That's the name of that song.

LASKEY: And your wife's name is Lisa.

MAY: On a record. Can you imagine that, to find the name "Mandalay" and then have "Lisa" on the back? I'm getting it mounted in plastic so it won't get broken, and keep it. But that's how the title came.

LASKEY: Was Mandalay, when you designed it-- Perhaps you should describe where it is and what it is.

MAY: I was going to add one thing though. A few years later I planned a house in the Philippines to be built. But I had to go to the Philippines under the contract two



times to get the job finished for Benny Toda, Mr. and Mrs. Benigno Toda [Jr.], who owned the Philippine Airlines. So, we got to the Philippines, and then we decided to go around the world. And we stopped in Burma. So we did get back to Mandalay and back to where she was born. [tape recorder turned off]

We were talking about Mandalay. It's a home that I built in 1952, while we were on the low-cost house. I had a wonderful young man here, Jack Lester, who ran the office for what custom work we were doing, and we did the drawings, and it was built while I was in and out of town. I was on the road most of those two or three years. It was a house that I built to end all houses because the site was so great. It was fifty-five acres at the end of Sullivan Canyon, adjoining the state park, Will Rogers Park, on the west. The mountaintops, we own to the mountaintops. It's very private, and it's very secluded. So the house, as I say, to end all houses had to have everything I wanted in it, like radiant heating. We provided for expansion.

I sent drawings to three architect friends and said, "Please kick the plans apart," and they all came back with suggestions. Some of them said, "It looks fine the way it is." One of them said, "Why are you putting a bidet in Mr.'s bath? It should be in Mrs.'s bath." I wanted it, and she didn't. [laughter] So that was the reason, but it





wasn't a good reason. It should have been there anyhow. So, the house was criticized very well.

House Beautiful, I was very close with House Beautiful. I had been on the staff for many years, or several years. Elizabeth Gordon was a dear friend, and she had done so many of our houses with House Beautiful. I wanted them to publish it. So, I took the drawings back on a special trip to New York, sent them ahead of time, and then I came back to discuss it. They said that they weren't interested, and I was flabbergasted.

"Frankly," she said, "it's just too big. You can't have a living room fifty-five [feet] long and furnish it." She said, "How would you like to try to furnish Grand Central Station?"

I said, "I can try. But I'm sure I can furnish this living room."

"No," she said, "it's just out of the reach and comprehension of our readership."

I was going to do it. That was it. I wasn't going to change it.

So, I went back to L.A. I immediately went to Paul T. Frankl, who was a dear friend and who was, as I've told you, one of the big influences in my life. And I said, "Paul, Elizabeth says it's too big. What do you think?"



And he looked at it, and he said-- He's a short man, around five foot two, and shiny head and Viennese and sharp as a tack. Anyhow he took a look at it, and he said, "Humpf, humpf." He said, "You'll see the day that this isn't big enough. How much bigger can you make it now?"

I said, "The foundations are all poured."

He said, "I don't care. How much bigger can you make it now?"

I said, "Well, I can push this out."

He said, "Do it. Push it out right here and here, otherwise it's all set." He said, "Make it as big as you can now. That's all you can do."

And I've never forgotten that because since that time we've added on fourteen times to the house to increase the area, fourteen times, and it still isn't big enough.



TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO

JANUARY 13, 1983

LASKEY: Did you build Mandalay for yourself as the house to end all houses, as you mentioned, or was it still as an experiment? Were you using it partially to experiment with new ideas?

MAY: Well, to answer your question, every house I built was the house to end all houses when I built it for myself.

My first house, it was a complete breakaway from anything that had ever been done. It was a little house around a courtyard, and it only had maybe 1,200 [square] feet in it. But it had a beautiful courtyard with a big olive tree, and in it we had the first garden lighting of Mr. [E.B.] Nightingale. He retired from General Electric, and he was just starting his garden lighting. He lit the whole thing. We laid the tile floors in one day. We laid the tile floors and built the house on top of the tile floors eliminating cutting and fitting tile. It was the best house at its time.

Then we built the next one up in Los Angeles when I moved to L.A., and it was the one that I met Paul T. Frankl and Mrs. Juliette [Van] Rosendahl that helped us get the contacts. At that time for me it was the best I had done.

The next house was [CM] No. 3. It was down at Riviera



Ranch. That was the one Elizabeth Gordon latched onto. With edition after edition, I think it appeared in ten editions of House Beautiful in various forms as we added changes. Every house I would do, I have added changes as time went along.

Then [CM] No. 4 was the Skylight House. Well, that was a real revolution, because I figured you had to light the center of the house, and I had a skylight and that was about thirty-by-forty or -fifty. It opened up like a clam. It opened up with the weather. And the daylighting was absolutely perfect. You had light in the center of the house, and you had light coming in from both sides. You had both worlds. That was a big breakthrough for me at that time. There was nobody interested in skylighting the way there is now. That was back in 1949. But it had mistakes in it. We lived in it for a year and a half and found all the things wrong with it. I'm still--

I just recently used some of the ideas in a house we did out in Agoura that has movable partitions. I'm now building for my daughter in Mandeville Canyon. I just bought the lot, and we're going to build one using all the principles of that Skylight House with movable partitions plus just one great room. You can build one great room for nothing compared with building five little rooms. In one great room you can seat fifteen people for dinner, sixteen





people for dinner with movable partitions. In the same size house with box rooms, you can't seat ten.

LASKEY: Well, how do you arrange living in a house that has movable partitions? Is the furniture also movable?

MAY: All furniture's movable obviously.

LASKEY: Well, I mean, do you specifically buy lightweight furniture?

MAY: No, no.

LASKEY: Do you decorate to accommodate this?

MAY: Well, first of all, real cheap, you put one great big heating system through the whole house. So you've got one thermostat that maintains the temperature of all the rooms the same but those can be added. Then you have certain fixed things, like the bathrooms. The bathrooms are all fixed. Their partition has been fastened down, but it holds things just like a wardrobe. Then there are about six partitions you move that you can close off to make a bedroom or a den or you can make the living room bigger or you can push them all back against the wall and make one great room. And then the kitchen is one fixed partition where the plumbing is. You look over the top of the partition, so you see the ceiling and the skylight. Then you put a lot of big plants in, and that helps break up space. With the big plantings-- You've seen the pictures, haven't you?



LASKEY: Yes, I've seen the pictures of the Skylight House.

MAY: And then with the big planters and with the movable partitions, once you get what you like, you leave it that way except when you want to make a change, you just quick push--

LASKEY: Just push a wall out. [laughter]

MAY: --and the closet moves with you.

LASKEY: It's a great idea, but I was just wondering how one decorated it. Or whether you buy furniture--

MAY: You need two people to pick up the sofa. It takes two people. Or one person can shove it hard and it slides. You don't move it that much once you get your perfect setup.

In fact, the proof of that is Mrs. Newby Foster. She bought the Skylight House [CM No. 4] from me and moved in. It's just the perfect house where she just wouldn't change a thing except that she did this, she moved the partitions around the way she wanted them, and then when she found out they were the way she wanted them--there were two or three partitions she didn't need, so she gave them to me--she put them in permanently. So, now it's the way she wants it, and it's nailed down permanently. No move.

LASKEY: I like the idea of movable partitions.

MAY: It's a great house, but it was way ahead of its time, way ahead of its time. In fact, as I say, just last year,



we used the idea for one job out in Agoura for the Dean Rasmussens.

LASKEY: Well, your Mandalay has-- The living room, your large living room that you talked about, has a stationary skylight in the center.

MAY: But we found out-- That's what we learned. See, we had to make the skylight so big that it let in more light than we needed. You only need so much. Like a knothole will let in quite a bit of light. If there were a knothole and if you were in a closet and there is no light, with a knothole it will let in a lot of light. And then if you make it twice as big, it won't let in twice as much light. Pretty soon you get to the point where it won't let in any more light. You can make it all glass or three-fourths glass, and it's still the same amount of light.

So, we found that we made the skylight way too big, and then it had a terrible disadvantage. When you opened it up, you couldn't screen it, because a horizontal screen would sag. If you put enough ribs in it to keep the screen from sagging, it would pick up dirt because it was horizontal and you couldn't clean it. So, the dirt came in, and it did come in with the leaves. In the fall you would sweep leaves off your living room floor. And it was too big. Also there was the problem of opening and shutting. We had an airplane rigger work the pulleys. The wires to



the pulleys had to oscillate back and forth just right or it would get racked and then it got stuck. One day it rained, I think I told you, and we got home just in time to mop it up and get it closed.

It served a great purpose. That's what all my houses do. I mean, I learned, so that's why I try to keep ahead of everybody, because I knew more about skylights at that time than anybody else did. Then they came out with plastic skylights, which look like-- They spoil the looks of your house.

LASKEY: The little bubbles.

MAY: Yes. Then they also generated a lot of heat, until they changed the plastic. But everybody learns. In the meantime I found-- Down the ridge was the first time that's ever been done. I'd never seen them before, what we did on the [CM] No. 5 house, that's Mandalay.

So, Mandalay, to answer your question, we made it to be the biggest glass house there was. Paul T. Frankl helped me to make it bigger, but I found it wasn't big enough. By saying "big enough," I mean when you put the furniture in the living room the way you want it, I like to have ten feet from the edge of the rug to the wall. It was five feet. So, when our man comes in to lay the fires, he's got to go sideways in the five feet with a load of wood, or he's got to walk across the rug. And so it's not





big enough; there's just no question about it. Some friends say, "Well, you're spoiled. You say it's too [small] and it isn't too [small]."

I say, "Well, OK, would you like to sit in this chair and stick your feet out in front of the fire?"

If we could push the master bedroom, if I can push that chair back five feet, why, he wouldn't stick his feet in front of the fire. It's just crowded. And when you get used to space, then you get spoiled.

You start with a nucleus of furniture, around a conversation group, and then you should have space from that group out to a wall. You shouldn't be up against the wall, and that's where I need more space. That's why I never made that mistake again.

I've had several clients on important big houses say, "That's too big."

And I've said, "You've got to believe me now."

On one we had a feud almost. His wife stuck for me, and he made it into a joke, "It's too big". He's never going to live in a place where he couldn't find his wife, he said. When we got all through, now they say it's the greatest house I ever did.

Most people think the house I did for them is the greatest one I ever did, because each one is so different,



but it fits them. What they mean is, "For us it's the greatest house you ever did."

LASKEY: Of course.

MAY: But Mandalay is the same way for me. It's the greatest house I ever did, because I keep changing it. And when I say we've changed it, we've enlarged the space, I've added onto the space thirteen times. I have a map-- You saw the talk, didn't you?

LASKEY: Yes, out at UCLA.

MAY: That doesn't mean we haven't made fifty changes in wiring and lighting and light fixtures and a wood post to a wonderful iron post and a light fixture to a different light fixture and then change and add to the wiring and change the system to central control, a new automatic system. When we come into the gates, we can push a button and all the lights from the gatehouse to the main house all turn on. If somebody's up there and it looks like anything's wrong, we push the same button for five seconds and the sirens go on. There's a new what is called "interfacing"--interfacing lighting system, but this means you've changed it for the better. We're constantly changing things, and I'm trying out things. I'll sit down and see something, and I'll say, "That's wrong."

I think I told you about my books. We have a rule-- I've got a lot of rules I go by. You can say rules are



made to be broken. There's a lot of talk about that. But on the other hand, if you break all the rules you wind up in jail. You might break a rule once, park once, and get a ticket and then you've broken a rule. But if you get fifteen or twenty tickets, you lose your driver's license, say, for speeding or anything else. We cannot break rules without-- If you break rules in our place you get bad houses. If you keep to rules, they'll be better. If you break a few once in a while, then you may get a super result.

On the rule breaking, in my living room I started to collect old books. I had one great wall of books. It went all the way down the east side of the room, and then it quit. This was the long wall. Then on the short wall, forming the outside corner, it had plaster and paintings and some nice things there, but it never looked right. I have a rule that is never broken, I never change building materials on an outside corner. If you come to a brick wall down to here-- Say, take a brick wall all the way to the corner. Then at the outside corner you put plaster up to meet the brick and make your outside corner, you can see the bricks are only a brick thick. If you return bricks around the corner and quit on an inside corner, it'll be all brick. So you'll see the wall's all brick. It's very



simple, but it's very important. So, anyhow, here I was breaking my own rules in furnishing.

So I saw it one night, and I said, "Gee, there it is." So, I went up and got more old books and we turned the corner. Now it's one of the most striking things in the room. The books turn the corner.

It's all materials. All books or all plaster or all brick. So, I broke a rule, and it was a rule you can't break. So, there are some rules you can't break without detriment. That's why we've built lots of houses for people. That's why I have in my contracts--you make an agreement before I start, or I won't do it--no changes will be made in [the] architecture of any kind. By you or the landscape architect or the building contractor, I list a whole bunch of people, so there's no fooling when it says no one can make a change without my consent in writing.

Now, it's for your benefit. It's not for my benefit. I mean, if you want to wreck your house, why, you paid for it, it's your house, you're the owner, but I want to know about it. Maybe I'll talk you out of it. Maybe I'll try to do what you want to accomplish and do it better. But I don't want any-- I'm firm. I'm firm about that, because this was twenty years ago I started this. Because people would come out--





One job, the contractor said, "Well, look, we're on the top of a mountaintop." [This was] a big knoll out in the San Fernando Valley. He said, "There's no way for moisture to get up into the house because everything's draining away."

And the owner said, "That's right."

He said, "Well, it's amazing. You've got all this rock under the house at the foot of the foundation. It's wasted. We could save \$2,000." Today that would be times twenty. So, \$2,000 would be about \$40,000.

So, the owner said, "OK, do it."

So, the contractor did it. I didn't know about it. He didn't tell me. In those days we used linoleum. So, they put the linoleum down, and, in about a month, why, the owners called me. He was probably one of the top tax attorneys, Tom Dempsey, in Los Angeles many years ago. We looked at it, and it had bubbles all over it. It was bubbling up. And I said, "There's moisture getting up here."

And he said, "Well, how could it?"

I said, "Well, there's no way. I've never had this happen before."

Anyhow, we found out he had OK'd to take out the rock. Well, the rock is a moisture barrier and was also solid for a vapor seal because the rock contains six inches of air



from the ground. The fact that it's on top of a mountain made no difference about water running off. Surface water would run off, but there's moisture in the ground when you water the plants. It's the same thing as being in a meadow. So, there we were stuck. No way to do it. So, we had to put in a waterproofing layer and then go back to asphalt tile.

It just proves to me that you cannot let people make changes on your drawings unless you know what they are, and, if OK, approve it, you're responsible. So, here I was responsible, and they didn't build it according to the drawings. So, now we're very firm on that point. That gives a better house and makes it good for everybody.

Like Mrs. Welk-- There's an article in the [Los Angeles] Times [Home] magazine, it was a Lawrence Welk and his wife interview, Questions and Answers, and they said, "How did you get along with the builders?"

And she said, "Well, just fine. I painted my rafters purple."

I remember that too. I said, "You can't do that. You'll wreck the house."

She said, "Mr. May, I like purple."

I said, "Yes, but, Mrs. Welk, outside they're going to be white, and then they're going to come to the wall, and they're going to be purple inside."



She said, "Well, paint them purple outside.

I said, "Then that'll really wreck it."

She said, "I let him just talk himself out and then I said, 'But, Mr. May, I really would like to have them purple,' and so he did it."

But that's the answer. If you want to cut your own throat, why, go ahead, good. I'll let you do it, but I'll try to keep you from doing it.

So, anyhow, that's the reason for that.

That's what happened in Mandalay. We made mistakes, but if we made a mistake, and if I ever caught it, I changed it. If a new thing comes out, and I try it, if it doesn't work, why, I take it out, charge it to experience. LASKEY: Well, that's what I was wondering. How you decide when you can break the rules, or when you experiment and when you stick to the traditional rules?

MAY: When you're as old as I am and have worked as long and had as many clients and had as many problems and as many heartaches and as many triumphs, you learn what rules you can break. \*[You can't change materials, textures, or colors on a outside corner; on an exterior corner on the interior or exterior of the building--never!] And if you build walls and you put a cant to them instead of straight

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



up, they'll look better because we're building with what we call a gravity material--Old World architecture, adobe and the old thick walls. If they're vertical, they look like they're falling over. If you see a tall, tall building, it looks like it's leaning, falling over. If you put a taper to it, why, it looks straight. And there're just a lot of subtleties one learns from experience that they don't teach in schools. I don't know why, but they don't.

There are ten or twelve basic rules, any one of which you break, won't hurt, but it won't be as good. Put them all together and you'll say, "This is just wonderful." But you don't know what it is. Like I say, I used to like to taste some food that's cooked some way and say, "This is just wonderful." Then ten other cooks will wreck it. It's all food; it all comes out of the same market.

LASKEY: Same food.

MAY: Same market, same food.

LASKEY: I saw a picture of Mandalay once, of the kitchen, of the refrigerator, which was a walk-in refrigerator, which I thought was just wonderful. How did you come up with that?

MAY: Well, real simple. You see, this is [CM] No. 5. In [CM] No. 3, World War II was coming, so I added on to No. 3, I added on a big walk-in freezer and cool room. It was out in a lean-to against the building. So you walked in





outdoors. You went outdoors, and it had a padlock on it. There was no other way to put it, but architecturally it worked out beautifully.

Well, what I learned was this. The cooler was out of this world, but the freezer was so big, we ran compressors to run a great big room as if we were a meat house and we were a butcher shop and we ended up buying enough meat that we didn't even fill it. But during the war, it worked out well because all of the neighbors would get a chance to buy meat or they'd go out to a ranch and come back with a whole half a beef cut up, and we'd store it for them. So, we had the thing just filled with all the neighbors' frozen meat. And then we had other kinds of frozen things, frozen vegetables and frozen this and that, but it was way too big. So when I built Mandalay-- Also every time you had to go outside for the cooler it was terrible because that was back and forth to get vegetables and things that would be in the cold room. So, I made the cold room so you could reach in from the kitchen. You'd have access right beside it. You didn't see the door. You can see the door to enter it. It's insulated, but you take food out from the side and it had three reach-in doors, for different kinds of produce. Then we just went back to a regular standard freezer, which I didn't know. You've got to try it out. It turned out best, but how would you know?



As I say, some of these professionals design houses, and then they don't live the way they design them. Some designers don't know. Well, you know, if you only have a pair of blue serge pants or Levis and a sweater, how do you know how to make tray drawers. I used to learn how. But you can get too many tray drawers in a house, and you can have not enough. You can have not enough for double hanging or single hanging. All those things, I think, come from experience. Then, many people I've built for don't really know what they need. We analyze what they-- We see how they are living and show how they can live better. That's where we get a lot of our work.

We have all kinds of strange things happen. Did I tell you about the man from Germany? We're building a fabulous house now. It's one of the biggest ones we've ever built. And the man has-- Money's no object. But he said, "There's only one thing I want you to do for me. I want you to put a urinal in the powder room."

I said, "Why?" and didn't start to work on it. About the third or fourth sketch, I hadn't shown it.

And he said, "Well, where's the urinal in the powder room?"

So, I thought it was about time I had to break the news, and I said, "In America we don't do that."

He said, "Well, in Germany we do."



And so we had a real battle going on.

LASKEY: You were building the house here, not in Germany?

MAY: Yes, right here.

He had a lovely German wife, and she never said a word. Finally I said, "Now, look, I'm going to be frank with you. Lovely women, your new neighbors in Montecito, are going to use the powder room. How'd you like to have your wife sitting down with a urinal staring her right in her face?"

"See," she said, "I told you!"

And he backed off. [laughter]

I was exaggerating, because I could have put it around the corner. But he agreed to take it out.

That's a lot of the work. We do teach people how to live. And I learn from them. When you get some one--

I have a client. For two generations, he'd lived on a plantation in Germany, and his parents went to Russia with one of the vice-presidents of the United States way back. That type of background. Impeccable background. Indentured servants. And they came out here, they brought their headman. And they knew things about living that I had never experienced. I sure learned about it from them, what to do. It was reflected in the house.

So it was in building like this, it's an education. We educated about the low-cost house. We educated people



how to have and enjoy outdoor living. We educated people how to have fire pits. When I first started, there was no such thing as a pullman lavatory. I think I told you I used these kitchen sinks and we used shower spouts to fill them. I still do.

LASKEY: Well, you also do a lot with covered pools or partially covered swimming pools.

MAY: Oh, yes, we helped bring the swimming pool indoors. Tommy Church and I fought that battle. He said, "No, a pool is a pool. It doesn't belong inside. Inside, it's a gymnasium or a YMCA." But he didn't get the idea that I had, and that was to bring in light and fresh air and put sunshine on it, fill the area with plants. The minute you put sunshine on a swimming pool, it's not a YMCA. So, he did permit-- I say "permit" because when you work with Tommy, why, he does what he is going to do. The landscaping is his. But, he let me bring the pool halfway in under a gabled porch, a continuation of the living room. So, we had one of the posts sitting in the pool, and then the house porch came out partially over the pool, which was a beginning. And then with that, I took off and opened up the roof \*[and planted the planters with tropical plants. That was twenty-two years ago, and I've never planned or

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





built an exterior swimming pool since. My porches with heated decks are used all year long, not just in spring and summer and useless for six months of the year. Every owner loves the idea and uses the pool year-round.]

People say, "Oh, you get condensation all over everything." They don't know what they're talking about. It's the relation of the size of the pool and the room to the size of the opening that eliminates condensation. If you close it over, which is the kind of situation I have right now-- In Georgia, where the temperature goes down to below freezing, we have two residences with swimming pools indoors with glass roofs, but you have to have dehumidifiers in operation, which is part of the game. If you want to have a swimming pool in Georgia or anywhere else in the world, you want to be able to use it all the year around, so you pay for dehumidification. But it works beautifully.

I've got pictures of many, many pools, I'll show them to you before you go if you'd like to see one, an indoor pool. One of the most beautiful pools I ever did is in Georgia. All the blossoms are outside on the trees; \*[indoor plantings are thriving. You're inside eating on the terrace like a jungle beside the swimming pool, inviting. The temperature and your comfort is perfect, because]

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



dehumidification is taking place. Otherwise, in Georgia it's too cold in the winter to use a pool and too humid and hot in summer. So it just sits there. In fact one place we did--

LASKEY: It's not heated?

MAY: Yes, others heat the pool, \*[summer and winter. But it's too cold out of doors in winter and too hot and humid in summer, unless you can control the climate by enclosing the pool as we do.]

LASKEY: You have to heat the room.

MAY: Yes, in winter and cool it in summer. An outdoor pool in winter, it's too cold to use. When I was a guest there, at the adjacent plantation, you couldn't walk across the lawn to the pool, because the ice was still frozen on the grass. And then should you put the pool indoors with no sunshine in winter, the humidity rises. It's no good. So, the combination was what we did. And, once we did it, they use their pool all the time. Now the owners want me to do a pool for them in Cleveland indoor-outdoors.

But, again, to sum up, all these things you've got to experiment with, do them yourself. You think of these ideas and then try them. If they don't work, you don't do them again. If you do them without trying them, why,

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



you're liable to be sued. I've never carried any kind of errors and omissions insurance.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: Never any kind of insurance, liability insurance on my designs, because I've never built anything for anybody I hadn't done myself. So, if it wasn't built the way I did it, it wasn't worth-- I made sure it was built the way I knew; I wouldn't let them get into trouble. [tape recorder turned off]

LASKEY: I think the idea that you experimented with all the changes that you made in your own house first before you attempted to use it on your clients was rather interesting, because I don't think that's necessarily true in the case of many architects or designers.

MAY: I think that is true. And I was lucky in doing that. Of course, one reason was, I specialized. I just built one kind of a house. Most architects will build anything you want, I mean, in style and character. I know, Paul Williams-- Let's just take Wallace Neff. He had three styles. In each one, he was the best there was in all three styles.

I just had one style. So I was able then to concentrate on it. So, anything I learned in my style, like the ranch house, would fit all the other ranch houses, like skylighting, daylighting.



Then spreading the house out the way I did, we had problems in heating, and we had problems of-- In those days, before we had radiant heating, we used unit heating. We had heat for each room, or a heater for each room, a furnace for each room. Just many things like that just became a specialty for that type of a house. You wouldn't think of using a heater for each room in a Paul Williams house or a Wallace Neff house. They had central heating in those days. And then with radiant heating, of course that solved everything. We were then able through a pipe to carry hot water for a long distance.

And then when it came to cooling, I experimented in my house. I don't know whether I brought that up. I have one of the greatest cooling systems devised up to date. It's a radiant cooling-- It's actually what they call valance cooling. We have a gas water chiller a long distance away from the house, to quiet the noise, and then it's piped, insulated pipe, into the rooms. I only installed it in the living room because it was experimental. However, I've not needed to put it through the whole house. The living room is so cool, it cools the entry, dining room, and kitchen beautifully. \*[The rest of the house is automatically dehumidified, making it most comfortable.]

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





LASKEY: It sounds wonderful.

MAY: It's the same air, and it just drops from the cooled valances, which are inconspicuous on the wall at the ceiling and are concealed. You can't see them.

Architecturally, they're an addition to the room. They give a third-dimensional look to the corners.

Some of the critics have said, "Well, what do you do when you have a lot of people and there's no ventilation?"

It's real simple, we just open the door. [laughter] And it blows it out. The same thing with the radiant heat because there's no ventilation, but you have the great ability to to be able to heat the floor. Open the door and blow it out. Close it up and it's warm again, because you're heated by radiant rather than hot air.

People with a hot-air system think they're changing the air, but they don't. They don't really change the air. They do in commercial buildings, but in residential you don't. You just take the same air over and over again, and you can filter it.

See, with hot air, the fixtures, and effects and furniture--everything's cold; the air is hot. You're uncomfortable because your body is radiating the cold walls. If you heat the air long enough, these bodies will warm up. But if you sit in a chair, it's cold, with hot air, and it's uncomfortable. With radiant heating, it's a



ray of heat like the sunshine. You can stand in the sun, or you can stand in the shade, the temperature's the same, but the ray is what gives you that warm feeling. So, with radiant heating, everything's warm. The bedclothes are warm, the rugs are warm, the floors are warm. And yet the air could be cool. Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright used to say, "Warm feet, cool head." [laughter]

LASKEY: Also that book, which is a point that you made, the radiant heating allows you to spread out your ranch-style house, whereas Wallace Neff and Paul Williams built in a far more traditional style with a central heating system.

MAY: They all fight the second story. You see, the hot air rises. It all goes upstairs. Then they beat it by putting cold air returns downstairs. So they suck the air back down and then blow it out again. But it's just as archaic as a gearshift on an automobile. There's no way you can come out with hot air and call it anything of heat compared to what we have now.

Now we've gone into solar heating and cooling using the heat pump, whereby we take water out of a well. Most of our houses are big enough where we can dig a well. We take the water out and put it through a heat exchange. We cool and heat with the same water well, use it for hot water or swimming pool water, or a pond or lake, or return



it back in the ground. So, we're way out in front on that. That will improve over what we are doing as technology, experience, and the equipment gets better.

We did a house recently, 1983, for a wonderful couple in Rancho Santa Fe, the [Real] Axlines. It has a water well. There were all kinds of problems, because it was the first one. But we knew it was right, and Mr. Axline knew it was right. He wanted to do it; so we did. I talked to him about two weeks ago. He said that it's just wonderful. He can't believe how great the heat is and the two-thirds savings in fuel. I know how good it is, but it's his first experience with it.

We've had many advances since we built my house Mandalay in 1953. We now have an insulated floor. We put the pipes close together, and we install real thin tile on top. You can't tell the thickness of the tile the way we lay them. It looks thick. And then we get a very fast [heat] response from the floor. Like if you take a tin frying pan and put it on the stove, it will get hot immediately. If you put a cast-iron [pan] on the stove, it takes quite a while for it to even get warm. That's the difference between radiant heating in my house and most everybody else's house. Our pipes only have about two inches to heat; so, therefore, we can run the water much cooler. The hot water, we run it cooler, not so hot, warmer, just warm



water, and get a wonderful effect because you're not losing any heat any place and it doesn't take a long time to get it up, \*[temperature from a cold start. And it keeps a more even temperature.]

So, the answer Mr. Axline said was that he couldn't believe how great the heat was. It was wonderful. He was heating three times the area for the same price as at the other house. Three times the area. There's no gas. Gas has gone up so tremendously. It's all electric. In the future electric will be the only way to go because no matter what source of energy you will get, in the future it will be transmitted over electric, with their easement and rights of way, distribution stations, etc. We found that out the hard way.

LASKEY: That's interesting. Your houses are all electric?

MAY: No, no, but they're going to be now with the heat pumps. See, the gas has become so expensive, and it's still going up. They deregulated and they have to live up to the old contracts for the gas, and we're going to get another bump here in Los Angeles. Ours has gone from heating our house-- I've got the proof of it. I keep records of it for the reason \*[to convince clients in regard to heating design and requirements and results--the

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





bottom line cost of operation.] I've heated my house with radiant heating for \$50 a month roughly, average over ten years at first, after 1954. It's now up to \$300, using the same gas, same house. The house is a little larger, but it's not enough larger in that respect to make much difference.

LASKEY: Three hundred dollars!

MAY: In winter now it goes up to \$500 from the old \$50 per month average. Electric facilities all over the country have their electric lines \*[systems and they are constantly being improved and upgraded. They are put up with an eye to the future that they will become the distribution medium for most all of our energy.] So, when we get the ultimate source, it's going to be generated into electricity. Even like deep compressed bottled gas that they bring over from Sumatra and elsewhere will be converted to electricity; they will put it over the electric lines. They won't be hauling it over the streets in tanks like we're doing now.

Of course, that's in the future. They'll be shooting it through the air or something like that, like they send television through. I doubt that though, but they probably will. And solar's not here yet, except to solar heat the water well, because the amount of collectors it takes, you

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



hardly ever get your money back. I think that is pretty well established. And also with the voltaic cell that's on the way, they're too expensive yet. Even when the government gives you voltaic cells, for experimenting, you can just barely come out.

LASKEY: But that will be something that should improve in the future, something they're working on.

MAY: That's right, but the point that the thinkers are, and I've talked to several of them-- Like when we did the George Nickel house in Bakersfield, a beautiful ranch house on the big Kern River project. You can see both ways about twenty miles of waterfront. I was insisting on the radiant heating in the floors. They finally came up with the fact that-- We didn't know the possibilities [of a] water well at that time. That was less than five years ago. So, Mr. Nickel was on the board of Pacific [Gas and] Electric, in Northern California, I think, the utility company. And they said, "Go electric. Because no matter what happens we can be sending whatever source of fuel over our system. We can transfer it cheaper there than you can on the roads in trucks obviously." So, the Nickel residence went all electric. The bills are pretty high now, but now they are not so high when you compare my gas bill from \$50 to \$500. And so, his is high, but it will stay where it is in relation to the other fuels.



LASKEY: The other costs, right.

MAY: Other fuels, other fuels.

LASKEY: In Mandalay, sort of going off on the other subject, you have-- I remember seeing a picture of your music room, in which you have your cut-down pianos. Why did you do that?

MAY: That was a thing that I \*[had to do. There was too much waste, unusable space there and with our low furniture, two grand pianos were out of scale. Frankl thought it was a good idea and remarked he wished he had thought of the idea.] I did it a long time ago. I had the feeling that when you go into a house, you see a piano, and there's all that space under the piano, serving no good, just for one person's legs if he should sit down and play. Then I realized that you don't put your legs under the piano. So, I immediately cut one down. I got the right height and drew it up first and cut it, adding new legs. You sit down and spread your legs and never put them under the keyboard.. So, I gained all this space visually on top of the piano instead of underneath. It makes them look like Frankl furniture, which is low and comfortable. When I see a grand piano with its full height up on its wheels, it looks to me like a big elephant in a room, a white elephant. So,

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



the idea of putting it down low took on with Frankl, because he said, "What you should do is go into business cutting down pianos." So, that was the stamp of approval. I know it's right.

We have four of them in [our] house, four grands, and they're all cut down except Mrs. May's. She wouldn't let me cut it down. It's her own private piano, so I took the wheels off and put it back in a corner where you couldn't see it. [laughter] I put the drums in front of it. We have a bunch of them. We collect foreign musical instruments. We have a harp from Burma. We have drums from Mexico and some drums from the Orient. So, I put the drum collection low in front of the piano, and it kind of softens and hides it. The rest of the room looks so much better. In our living room we have two grands dead ahead when you come in, and they look wonderful.

LASKEY: Well, they look beautiful in the pictures.

MAY: They play just as well--

LASKEY: I think they're right with the look of your houses, the kind of low, long, spread-out feeling of the ranch house.

MAY: --unless you're a professional musician. I play, but I never seem to have time to really play very much. So, I like to see them there and not have all that space for that





one time that your two knees are supposed to go under the piano.

LASKEY: Well, I was going to ask you, with all the building that you've done and the designing and the work that you do, have you had time to keep up with your musical interests?

MAY: Oh, yes. I do quite a bit-- Not as much as I'd like to, but I belong to a couple of wonderful horseback groups, like the Rancheros [Visitadores], and for one week, we do nothing but play the piano, from morning till night. \*[We have about ten pianos on the ride; my camp, the Borrachos, has two Baldwin spinets.]

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: One time we had four pianos going at once. It was like an Indian roundup, you know when the old covered wagons used to go around in a circle. They'd make a circle to keep the Indians away. We made a circle with the pianos, and the piano players played with their backs to each other. We had a lot of fun. We carry two pianos with the Los Caballeros, the ranch group at Catalina, and we also carry two pianos with our group in Santa Barbara. So at least twice a year we have a two week workout.

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



LASKEY: This leads me into this whole other subject of the numerous things that you do aside from changing the life-style of the country, which is your horsemanship, your musicianship, your book collecting, your antique collecting, traveling--

MAY: Flying.

LASKEY: Flying.

MAY: I collect a lot of things. Besides my collection of antique parchment books, I collect inscribed books, if I know the author. I don't collect books as such, unless I know the author. And in the book collection, I don't collect unless my houses or I am in the book. There are quite a few books we've gotten into over the years. I've got some wonderful inscriptions, from Noguchi, well, gee, [from] Frank Lloyd Wright. I've got five books of Frank Lloyd Wright. Bill Lear. I've got Bill Lear's book. Anybody I knew or worked with, I've got their book. K. S. "Boots" Adams had a book. That's one of my great collections. I collect old books, as you know.

LASKEY: Yeah, I was going to say, you also collect rare books.

MAY: Rare books, yes.

LASKEY: How did you start that?

MAY: Well, Frankl had some very wonderful books that I always envied. He had about a four-by-eight bookcase



filled with these wonderful old books, and I always admired them. Then, when I was in Spain one time, I just happened to see some in a window. I went in and bought three or four and came home with them. Then I just got the idea. Then I went to Mexico and I started avidly going to the markets and buying them at the markets. And finally they looked so great-- Acoustically they're wonderful. The space that's there on the soft binding and the space over the top of the books is airspace and it goes back to the wall. Sound waves [don't] bounce back. So, it gives an acoustical effect, it gives a visual effect, and it gives an old effect, which we like. It doesn't look like a bunch of novels you just bought at a bookstore. So, old books would be one of my serious collections.

And then we collect all kinds of old furniture. I just came across some of the old fifteenth century corbels I got from the [William Randolph] Hearst estate. We got that in about 1950, and I bought everything they had that would fit our houses--old studs, old doors--which lots of it has since being incorporated into our house. Still have some of it left over we haven't used.

LASKEY: Oh, that's exciting.

MAY: Whenever I travel, I always keep an eye open to buy something that would be better than what we have.



LASKEY: Did your collecting come before your traveling or with your traveling?

MAY: Well, it all came about the same time. I started traveling very early, you know. We would go to Tijuana, Mexico, and buy tiles and that type of thing in the old 1930 days in San Diego. The really big impact was when I came up to L.A. and Mr. [Frederic] Blow at Westclox gave me all the antique furniture, and I thought he was spoiling my house. And Frankl gave me [a] shove in the right direction with the old Oriental pieces. He had a few wonderful old Mexican pieces. \*[Mr. and Mrs. Blow, in appreciation of the second house I did for them, bought me several things in Mexico as gifts. The greatest was a Mardonio Magana stone statue, thirty inches high. It is shown in the New York Museum of Modern Art book, Modern Mexican Sculpture. He also came] back with a big chest, he said, "Cliff, this had your name all over it; so I bought it for you." So, we still have that lovely piece.

Then Paul Frankl bought me a few pieces in Mexico. Then, by that time I was swung over to the fact that the case goods, meaning the hard pieces, like chests of drawers and buffets and tables should be-- There's much more character if they're old, if you like that. Then the soft

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





goods, or the sofas and chairs, should be comfortable because any old sofa benches are uncomfortable. They're hard. There was no upholstery on them.

LASKEY: They're terrible. I remember those horsehair hard sofas.

MAY: But contemporary upholstered pieces and beds and then antiques mixed in. I think there's quite an article that was done recently on the mixing of all the old, which gets back to the fact that the best of any old culture, they all go together. Oriental and--

LASKEY: Well, what you're trying for is a comfortable situation. If the seating is comfortable and modern, and what you're looking at is pleasing and interesting, and the acoustics are great, what could be nicer?

MAY: That's it! The other thing is that just because it's old it's not necessarily good. You've got to choose. On old antique furniture, remember there's one important rule: if it has feet, cut them off.

LASKEY: Really?

MAY: If the furniture has feet, cut them off. Claw feet, I mean. It's a pretty good rule. You ought to see a piece of furniture when you take them off, it looks so much better. It brings them up to date.

LASKEY: Oh, that's very interesting.



MAY: There are lot of rules like that. If you like feet, keep them, but if you add feet, it won't be as good as if you take them off. [laughter]

LASKEY: Those wonderful claws holding big, round balls, you know, like they used to have, you would cut those off?

MAY: Yes. That's an era that's long gone. When I learned to play the piano, my dad had a piano stool that had claw feet. I'll never forget it. I don't know where it went. Probably some duck shooter got it. That's the way they used to shoot ducks. You could raise or lower the height, and you get just the right height and spin the top.

LASKEY: That's amazing. What about your flying?

MAY: Oh, I love it. It's made it possible to get a lot of places faster than I could have. \*[I have 3,800 hours flying to my jobs all over the United States and Mexico.] In the old days, I used to play the saxophone when I flew on long trips. I had auto pilot, so I could sit right there and look and think. You can either put your hands in your lap or you can look at a map or you can pick up a saxophone and play the saxophone, \*[looking straight ahead, safely, while flying.] I had a little baby, a little small one, a curved soprano. I always kept it in the

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



airplane. I'd play it coming home, but as I grew older, I came to where I felt kind of tired upon arrival at home.

I told a doctor friend one day, and he said, "Well, gee, you're blowing at 8,000 feet." He said, "Try saving the blowing for when you're on the ground, sea level; you'll do better."

But then with the flying a lot of wonderful things have happened. We met a whole different group of people. That's one thing that happened. I have the horse group of friends, and I've got the flying group of friends, and I've got Mrs. May's group of friends--

LASKEY: The architectural group and design.

MAY: The architectural group, that's right. And you can go on. There must be five or six or seven, at least six groups that each have different spheres around them. We're pretty active in all of them. We have one of the great things in the Aviation Country Club of California. It's a group of fliers who have planes and no place to go. So every ninety days-- They have a tour chairman who picks out the very best place there is, always top, first-class. We go to places--like once we went to Creel, which is way up in Mexico. It's the Grand Canyon of Mexico. You fly down to a little Mexican town near Navojoa--Culiacan, I think it is--then you get on the train the next day, and then you go chugging up the hill. They put that train through about



fifteen tunnels to get up there. In one tunnel you go in and make a complete turnaround in the mountain and come back out. It's really fascinating. We go to places like that. We take our own music with us, and several members play the piano.

LASKEY: Oh, it sounds marvelous.

MAY: They're all exciting people. Cross-section of everything, attorneys, ranchers, builders. You've got doctors, merchants, test pilots, aeronautical engineers-- it's a cross-section of America. These people have airplanes, but they all have this common interest of flying together. Lately they've taken up golf; so these days wherever we go, we go to the big golf course.

The first place they went was to the Caribbean islands on one trip, where they all flew to New Orleans and then all took a jet plane. Then they've also gone to Honolulu but via the airlines. [tape recorder turned off]

LASKEY: We're coming near the end of the interview, Mr. May, and I wonder if there's anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about.

MAY: I think of one thing that I've-- Maybe I haven't invented it or discovered it, but I've noticed so many [people], like musical [composers], Tchaikovsky; I'm not too familiar with them, but many of them, the older they get, the better their work seems to get because they remain





active. In other words, what I'm trying to say, people in the arts seem to produce better as they get older. Frank Lloyd Wright, all the architects that I know of, the older they got, the better work they did. Look at Wallace Neff, his work got better and better. And Paul Frankl's work got better and better. John Lautner's is getting better and better. A. Quincy Jones's did. Everybody in the arts, [their] work got better. [Irving] Gill's got better, as [he] got older and more experienced. When they practiced right up to where they died, stayed in practice, didn't retire, why, it seems to me most of their work was better.

I know mine. I look back at things I did and say, "I wonder why I did it that way," because I think I can do them better now than I could then. I'm approaching seventy-five now. I feel like I'm better equipped than I was ten years ago. Each year I think I do better than I did the year before. But, then, now the thought is if you go to a different type of endeavor, electronics [or] computers, you burn out at thirty-five. Boys coming out of school are better equipped now, they tell me, than men at thirty-five and forty who haven't kept up by going back to school. In the computer sciences, in that field, you're an old man at fifty plus, and in architecture you're just getting started. Mr. Wright died at eighty-plus, wasn't it?

LASKEY: No, he was in his nineties.



MAY: He was running his school, Taliesin West, out there in Arizona with an iron hand.

LASKEY: He was indeed.

May: So, the thought I had was that the arts seem to be more kindly to ability and old age than any of the other forms of endeavor. A baseball player. A fighter's finished at thirty. Any form you want to take. They retire. Mandatory retirement for airline pilots is now below sixty, and now they're trying to get that lowered, I understand. You take just any endeavor you want to take. I can't think of any except maybe authors and songwriters maybe. But all the arts and artists seem to be able to keep on producing better and better as long as they want to work.

LASKEY: It's true. I thinking of the [Will] Durants and how long they wrote, and they kept getting better. But of course, I think you need the basic interest and the basic knowledge and the basic abilities to start with, and from then, particularly in a field like architecture, it is true.

MAY: Maybe that's why they go into that work, because they love it.

LASKEY: You need to love it.



MAY: To be an artist to start out is to be a beggar, almost. Imagine a man who paints pictures. When he first starts, he's got a long road.

LASKEY: Look at Picasso as another example of what you're talking about.

MAY: That's right. But anyhow, it's worthy of a little bit of thought.

LASKEY: Well, in that case, what's next?

MAY: Well, my next one is I'm doing a house that couldn't be built. I'm doing it now. We designed a house to be built on a hilltop of eight acres. The owner changed his mind, and now we're building on a hilltop of five hundred acres. We're building it for a man who can afford to build \*[anything he fancies, and what great fun it is for me to do.]

"I can afford it," \*[my friend for whom we're building it says. "I can afford this." And about five more, which will be the race track, main barns, let down barns, viewing stands, trainers quarters, and bunk houses, and mess hall and on and on.]

So, the challenge is unlimited. I'm proposing a heliport for them because they go back and forth to San Francisco where they race their horses, their main base

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.



track. Why should they not helicopter right into San Francisco airport, right where the racetrack is? We're going to do a lot of things there that-- I'm just fortunate having clients like this. And yet, you say you have a client, how did you get him? For twenty years we rode horseback together, and, for twenty years, he told me he was going to build a house someday, and now we're building it.

I have story after story I could tell you, but I'll tell you one short one with a moral or lesson. The one we did for Mr. and Mrs. Joe W. Brown. That's not Joe E. Brown the comedian, but Joe W. Brown. He was Senator Huey Long's partner in New Orleans. He ran the gambling. Huey Long arranged it and the politics. When Huey Long died, Joe W. Brown inherited everything. So, when gambling in New Orleans stopped, Joe W. Brown had to get out of [Louisiana]. So, he went to Las Vegas, taking all of his employees who were gamblers. So, he bought the biggest professional gambling place, the Golden Nugget. It was [in] downtown Vegas. And he brought all his gamblers and put them to work. We designed a large ranch house for them \* [on 15,000 acres on the Louisiana Delta--which, incidentally became the biggest natural gas field in Louisiana.

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\* Mr. May added the following bracketed section during his review of the tape transcript.





But for three years they were undecided about the ranch house style for them] and came back and talked to me about getting started each year. The fourth year they said, "We're going to go." They finally made up their minds. On the fifth year [the] drawings completed, we were all ready to go. We had a large lake dug and raised the level of the land where they were going to build because it was too low and flooded. They were under way, foundations in, and ready to go, when Mr. Brown dropped dead. I now look back and I see there were three years, three wonderful years, they could have lived in their house. Money was no object, but he and she were unable to make up their minds. In the meantime they lived upstairs in a small apartment over the gambling house, the Golden Nugget, that they owned in Las Vegas.

The other funny thing was, when they came out to Las Vegas, Mr. Brown told each employee to be Brown's guest and do any one thing he would like to do, anything he wanted really to do and let Mr. Brown know what it is. When they moved from the New Orleans delta, which is low and flat for hundreds of miles, to Las Vegas, one employee said, "All I want to do is sit on a mountain. I've never seen one."

LASKEY: And he never got it built?



MAY: No, never got it built. The Chris Choate drawing for the house, lake, gate house are on the wall. I'll show you.

Gatehouses, caretakers' houses, we even had the house so you could hose it out. We had scuppers everyplace. So, the furniture we were to design would be so that the water would flood under it up to three inches clearance; so you could hose water on and wash the floors just like you do the patio, and with warm floors, [they] would dry quickly. All the floors radiant heated. Crazy ideas, but it takes a lot of crazy ideas to find out the right one. Mrs. Brown thought it was the best idea in the house. And so did I.

LASKEY: I think it's a great way to end our interview, the fact that you're beginning to build a house that wasn't going to be built, or the house that couldn't be built.

MAY: As Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright told me more than once, "You'll find out that the best houses never get built."

LASKEY: But you're going to build it.

MAY: I'm going to build it now.

LASKEY: Thank you very much, Mr. May.

MAY: I've enjoyed working with you. It's a great pleasure.

LASKEY: Good luck on the house. I hope to see it.



# INDEX

- Adams, K.S. "Boots," 216, 279, 281, 339
- Alter, Lou, 236
- Architect/client relationship, 120-21, 317-20, 323-25
- Architectural Digest, 99
- Axline, Rea, 332, 333
  
- Balboa Park, San Diego, history of, 183-86
- Bathroom fixtures, 106-11, 201-2
- Beardwood, Jack B., 270-71
- Becket, Welton, 270-71
- Blow, Frederic M., 154-60, 341
- Bray, Irving, 298
- Bray, William, lawsuit against, 253-55
- Brown, Joe W., 217, 349-51
- Building costs, 93-99, 205-8, 297, 301-2
- Building regulations, 91-93, 290-91, 295-96
- Burnham, Marston, 140
  
- California architecture
  - Spanish period, 3-6, 29, 164-67
  - Monterey style, 168-70
  - contemporary ranch house, 169-70, 172-73, 187-89, 190-91
- Choate, Christian, 224-26, 237
- Church, Thomas D., 279-80, 287, 325
- Comstock, Hilliard, 251-52
- Copyright laws in architecture. See May, Cliff-copyright problems and lawsuits
- Corman, Roger, 288-89
- Cortese, Ross, 238, 294
- Cotton, O.W. and family, 60-61
  
- Dedekam, Carsten F., lawsuit against, 250-52
- Dempsey, Tom, 118-19, 318-19
- DeVilbliss Company, copyright problems with, 276-77
- Dolly, Chester F., 146
  
- Eagles Fly West (book by Ed Ainsworth), 18
- Estudillo family (maternal ancestors), 1-2
  - home and property, 1, 2-3, 12, 30, 32-34
  
- Farenholt, Ammen, 139-40
- Federal Housing Authority (FHA), 112, 117, 211, 295-96
- Fleet family (childhood neighbors in San Diego), 44
- Fletcher, Ed and family, 60
- Flooring systems, 111-18
- Forward, John, 63-65
- Foster, Newby, 234, 311
- Frank, Nicholas J., 132
- Frankl, Paul T., 154, 222, 296-97, 306-7, 339-40, 341, 346
- Frost, Wallace, 157-58
  
- Galvin, John, 160-63
- Garbage disposal, 175-76
- Gardner, Matt, 96, 132
- General Motors Company, lawsuit against, 274-75
- Gill, Irving, 45-46, 47-48, 86, 178, 183-84, 346
- Goodhue, Bertram, 184-86
- Gordon, Elizabeth, 103-4, 179, 192, 198-99, 208, 212-13, 215-16, 217, 221, 306
  
- Hale, William F., 90
- Hall, Peirson, 266
- Hardister, Ben H., lawsuit against, 250-52



- Heating systems, 329-35  
 Highland, Alex, 62, 138-39  
 Hopkins, Miriam, 282  
 Horton, Mr. and Mrs. Hiram T,  
     132, 134-36  
House Beautiful. See Gordon,  
     Elizabeth
- International style  
     architecture, 102-3,  
     104-5
- Johnston, Paul C., 70  
 Jones, A. Quincy, 346  
 Jones, Fletcher, lawsuit  
     against, 255-61,  
     263-70
- King, Scott, 203  
 Knecht, Oscar, 91
- Lane, Lawrence William, Jr.,  
     231-32  
 Langston, Wade, 133-34  
 Las Flores Ranch (home of Jane  
     Magee), 7-8, 19-28  
 Lauck, Chester, 282  
 Lautner, John, 346  
 Le Corbusier, Charles Edouard  
     Jeanneret-Gris, 104-5  
 Lester, Jack, 305  
 Levitt, William J., 169  
 Lichty, R.C., 82  
 Llewellyn, David, 140  
 Low-cost housing, 225-29, 231-  
     33, 237-39, 248-49,  
     289-96
- MacLaine, Shirley, 283-85  
 Magee, Bill (maternal uncle),  
     17-18  
 Magee, Henry (maternal  
     grandfather), 2, 18  
 Magee, Jane (maternal aunt),  
     6-7, 15. See also Las  
     Flores Ranch  
 Marshall, John, 41-42  
 Marston, George W., 59, 61-62,  
     183  
 May, Beatrice Magee  
     (mother), 55
- May, Charles Clifford  
     (father), 39-41, 53-55,  
     68, 72  
 May, Charles E. (paternal  
     grandfather), 36-38  
 May, Cliff, See also  
     Architect/client  
     relationship; Bathroom  
     fixtures; Flooring  
     systems; Garbage  
     disposal; Heating  
     systems; Low-cost  
     housing; Nail-on sash;  
     Refrigerators, walk-in;  
     Skylights; Swimming  
     pools  
     -ancestry, 1-2, 10-12, 36-41  
     -childhood and adolescence,  
     6-9, 13-28, 42-80  
     -buildings designed by  
         -Adams, K.S., house, 216,  
         218  
         -Alter, Lou, house, 236  
         -Axline, Rea, house, 332,  
         333  
         -Blow, Frederic M., house,  
         157-59  
         -Bonita Women's Club  
         building, 132  
         -Bray, Irving, house, 298  
         -Brown, Joe W., house,  
         217, 349-51  
         -Burnham, Marston, house,  
         140  
         -CM No. 1, 128-31  
         -CM No. 2, 152-53, 308  
         -CM No. 3, 198-202, 308-9,  
         321-22  
         -CM No. 4. See Skylight  
         House  
         -CM No. 5. See Mandalay  
         -Corman, Roger, house,  
         288-89  
         -Dempsey, Tom, house,  
         118-19, 318-19  
         -Farenholt, Ammen, house,  
         139-40  
         -Frank, Nicholas J.,  
         house, 132  
         -Galvin, John, house,  
         161-62





- Gardner, Matt, house, 96, 132
- Highland, Alex, house, 62, 138
- Horton, Hiram T., houses, 134-36
- Lane, Lawrence William, Jr., house, 231-32
- Langston, Wade, house, 133-34
- Lily Pond house, 140-41
- Llewellyn, David, house, 140
- Mandalay, 221-24, 230-31, 303-7, 313-17, 322, 336-37, 340
- Mee, George, house, 297-98
- Mondavi Winery, 298-301
- Nickel, George, house, 335
- O'Leary, Arthur J., house, 82-83, 85, 106, 108-10, 111-12, 119
- Pacesetter House, 210-13, 216
- Parker, Steven, apartments, 283-85
- Peterson, Austin, house, 217
- Price, Harold C., house, 281
- Riviera Ranch development, 149-51
- Rose, David, house, 236
- Schwabacher, Jack, house, 298
- Seligman, Mort, house, 96
- Skylight House, 233-34, 309, 311
- Smith, John A., house, 124-25, 127
- Stone Canyon house, 126, 140
- Tate, M.E., house, 116
- Toda, Benigno, Jr., house, 304-5
- Trenchard, O.H.B., house, 134
- Vanderlip, Kelvin, house, addition to, 287-88
- Van Heusen, Jimmie, house, 236
- Welk, Lawrence, house, 319-20
- copyright problems and lawsuits, 235-36, 240-44, 249-77
- house interiors and furnishings, 81, 131, 152, 154, 221-23, 226-31, 309-11, 313-14, 336-37, 340, 341-42
- interests
  - antique furniture collecting, 340-42
  - book collecting, 339-40
  - flying, 343-45
  - music, 53-54, 67-72, 74-75, 76-77, 337-38, 343
  - membership in social clubs
    - Aviation Country Club of California, 344-45
    - Pioneer Pacific Broadcasters, 67
    - Rancheros Visitadores, 338
  - philosophy of architecture, 29-30, 52, 86-90, 100-106, 163-74, 176-81, 190-92.
- May, Henry C. (brother), 56-58
- Mee, George, 297-98
- Miracle, Oliver Ulysses, 83-84
- Mondavi, Robert, 298-99
- Morganelli-Heumann and Associates, lawsuit against, 257-58, 264-69
- Mushet, Bill, 99
- Nail-on sash, 244-46, 291-92
- Nazimova, Alla, 282
- Neff, Wallace, 328, 346
- Nickel, George, 335
- Nightingale, E.B., 308
- Norcross, Carl, 192-93, 228
- Norcross, Elizabeth. See Gordon, Elizabeth



- O'Leary, Arthur J., 82-83  
 Olmstead brothers, 184-85  
 Ooms, Peter, 295-96
- Palmer, Vincent, 146  
 Parker, Steven, 283-85  
 Pedrorena, Victoria de  
     (maternal grandmother), 1,  
     2, 10  
 Peterson, Austin, 217  
 Price, Harold C., 281  
 Pullman lavatory. See  
     bathroom fixtures
- Ramona's marriage place. See  
     Estudillo-home and  
     property
- Ranch house. See California  
     architecture-Spanish  
     period; California  
     architecture-contemporary  
     ranch house
- Real, Manuel L., 266  
 Refrigerators, walk-in, 321-22  
 Rice, A.B., 113, 115  
 Rose, David, 236
- San Diego exposition, 183-86  
 Santa Margarita Ranch, 5, 9,  
     167  
 Schindler, Rudolph M., 178-79  
 Schutt, Burton, 296  
 Schwabacher, Jack, 298  
 Seligman, Mort, 96
- Silver, Ben, 144-46  
 Skylights, 233, 312-13  
 Smith, John A., 123-27, 142-  
     51 passim  
 Smythe, William E., 30-31  
 Spreckels, John D. and  
     company, 32-33, 59  
 Styris family (childhood  
     neighbors in San Diego),  
     41, 42-44, 46-47, 65  
 Swimming pools, 325-27
- Tate, M.E., 116  
 Toda, Benigno, Jr., 304-5  
 Trenchard, O.H.B., 134
- Vanderlip, Ellen, 287-88  
 Vanderlip, Kelvin, 286-87  
 Van Heusen, Jimmie, 236  
 Van Rosendahl, Juliet, 152-53  
 Veterans Administration (VA),  
     117, 211, 291
- Waterman, Hazel, 33-34  
 Welk, Fern, 319-20  
Western Ranch Houses (book  
     published by May in  
     collaboration with Sunset  
     Magazine), 209  
 Williams, Paul, 270  
 Wright, Frank Lloyd, 89, 221,  
     331, 339, 346, 351  
 Wurster, William W., 187-88
- Young, Harry, 21-23  
 Young, Kim, 21-22









